

Vol. 5 No. 2

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HARLEQUIN® WORLD'S BEST

Romances

FEATURE STORY
BY MARY LYNN BAXTER
PLUS
3 OTHER BESTSELLING
AUTHORS!

Everything But Time
As Time Goes By
East of Today
Quiet Lightning

MARY LYNN BAXTER
VICKI LEWIS THOMPSON
DIXIE BROWNING
TRACY HUGHES

Len Gooding

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MARY LYNN BAXTER

Mary Lynn Baxter sold hundreds of romances before she ever wrote one. The D & B Bookstore right on the main drag in Lufkin, Texas, is her home as well as the store she owns and manages. She and her husband, Leonard, garden in their spare time. Around 5:00 every evening they can be found picking butter beans on their small farm just outside of town.

VICKI LEWIS THOMPSON

Vicki Lewis Thompson tried out a few careers before realizing that she could actually pay the bills as a romance writer. A former English teacher and newspaper reporter, Vicki knew this was the job for her—not only because she loves her job, but also because, as she says, “I have an overactive imagination!”



DIXIE BROWNING

Award-winning, bestselling author Dixie Browning has written over fifty romance books since 1980. A charter member of Romance Writers of America, Dixie has toured extensively in order to research her romance novels. She also writes historical romances with her sister under the name Bronwyn Williams.

TRACY HUGHES

Tracy Hughes is the award-winning author of nearly twenty novels for Harlequin and Silhouette, as well as three mainstream single titles. She lives with her husband and two daughters in Mississippi, but she has lived in eight states and spent part of her childhood in Holland. She feels that falling in love is the most special feeling in the world, one that she experiences each time she writes or reads a romance.



HARLEQUIN® WORLD'S BEST *Romances*

From the desk of Candy Lee,
Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader,

It's been such a busy time for me...redecorating at home, friends arriving for a weekend visit and planning a long-awaited family reunion! Now I'm more determined than ever to take a night off to enjoy one of my greatest pleasures—an evening filled with exciting romance reading!

So tonight will be all mine—and I can't wait to sink into my favorite chair with this month's volume of the World's Best Romances, where a woman determined to give one man a piece of her mind ends up giving another her heart...a high school crush resting deep inside for ten long years is awakened by the hands of fate...a thunderous meeting turns into great passion...and when two lovers separated by danger are brought together once more—will they fall in love all over again?

Make this night an especially romantic one with each of the four wonderful stories in this latest edition of the World's Best Romances!

Best wishes,

Candy Lee

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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HARLEQUIN®
WORLD'S BEST
Romances

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**MARY LYNN
BAXTER**

Everything But Time



Once, Danielle and Keir had been lovers.
Now could they push aside the danger that
surrounded them, forget that time was their
number-one enemy, and love each other again?



The door chimes pealed loudly and insistently.

"Damn," Danielle Davis muttered under her breath. Seven o'clock. It was much too early in the morning for a usual visitor and much too early for bookstore customers, she thought, biting back the twinge of fear that stood through her like a dull knife.

She pivoted on her heels and rushed out of the room. She had just stepped on the top step of the carpeted staircase when a chirpy voice called up to

"I'm up, I'll see to the door."

Thank goodness for Jusie, Danielle thought as she turned away from the stairs and poked her head around the door on the right. If it weren't for Jusie Evans, who was both friend and housekeeper and at times guardian angel all rolled into one, Danielle would not be able to survive, much less work in her bookstore full-time or teach night classes at the university.

Danielle tiptoed across the room and red down at her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Ann, who was lying dead to the world.

Years burned the back of her eyes as she took in the long, thick eyelashes that fanned over deep green eyes, complementing a silky mop of black hair. If only she weren't her father's daughter. No! Don't think like that, she berated herself. Don't think about *him*!

Sighing deeply, she leaned over and grazed Ann's cheek with her lips before hurriedly exiting the room.

She met Jusie at the head of the stairs.

Her housekeeper's almond-shaped brown eyes were pensive and a frown wrinkled her forehead. "There's a man to see you. If I didn't know better, I'd say he looks like he's one of those FBI agents or Internal Revenue dudes," she whispered.

Danielle tried to smile, but it was impossible; her lips were too stiff. Why now? After all this time.

For the past three years, Danielle's life had settled into a pattern. She loved her work, owning and managing a small but lucrative bookstore in the quaint East Texas town of Nacogdoches. Adding to her pleasure was the convenience of having her business in the same building as her home. It was an ideal setup, allowing her to be close to Ann while she worked.

To Danielle, creating a home filled with love and security for her daughter and herself was the most important thing in life. Having been reared in an orphanage, she'd had a hard life. She had learned at an early age that she could count on no one but herself.

Smoothing her hands down her corduroy skirt, she breathed deeply and began a slow but determined descent down the stairs. Without hesitation, she twisted the knob and opened the

door that screened the stairs leading up to her private apartment. For once she did not pause to glance at the racks of paperback and hardcover books. She marched through the maze as though someone had a gun pointed to her head.

The door to her office was open. She paused long enough on the threshold to view the tall stranger standing in front of the bookshelves decorating one complete wall of her office. He was casually thumbing through the pages of a book when he looked up and saw her standing in the doorway.

"Good morning, Ms. Davis. I'm Tony Welch from the U.S. Marshal Service."

Danielle had to squelch the urge to turn and run. But somehow she managed to stand reed straight.

"Does it always get this cold in East Texas?" He smiled, obviously trying to put Danielle at ease. "It's a helluva lot colder here than it is in D.C. The minute I stepped off the plane, the chill cut clear through to my bones."

Suddenly she could not wait another second to find out why this man had intruded upon her life. "Mr. Welch, I'm sure you didn't come all this way just to discuss the weather. So if you don't mind—" She halted in midsentence.

Suddenly Tony Welch hated himself and his job for having to bring more pain down on those fragile shoulders. But he had to do it. If not him, someone else...

"You're right," he said gruffly. "You're needed in Washington. Immediately." He tried to ignore the way

she flinched as though he'd struck her. "I'm here to take you back with me."

"Why?" The simple word was barely audible.

"The Russian agent that has escaped the FBI's clutches for the last three years is finally in custody." He paused and eyed her closely. "Or at least we think he is. You're the only one who can identify him."

Her legs felt as though they were made of jelly. She felt herself begin to slowly unravel on the inside, a feeling she had hoped never to experience again. When the government had taken over her life three years ago, she had done so with a swift precision. Then they had disappeared, leaving her to live a normal life. Fool that she was, she had begun to think that she would never hear from them again....

How could she possibly endure turning to the place that had brought her so much heartache? But then she bitterly reminded herself that she had no say in the matter. The die had been cast a long time ago.

MARSHAL Luke Cassidy's office was on the fourth floor of the district court building. When she entered his office, he hastily circled the desk, his hand held out to her.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Davis. Here's a seat, won't you? I've never been able to beat around the bush, so I'll speak bluntly." He sat down and then leaned forward, looking at her, a hard glare reflected in his eyes. "Unfortunately, there's been a change in plans."

For a moment Danielle's eyes brightened. Dare she hope that it

ordeal would be over before it had even begun?

"The Russian agent is no longer in FBI custody." His mouth had tightened into a bitter line.

She lifted a hand to her throat. "Where...where does this leave me?"

"There's more," he continued bluntly. "We have strong reason to believe that your cover has been blown, that the agent and his counterpart can identify you."

Danielle's bag clattered to the floor.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's a damned mess."

"It can't be true," she whispered.

"I've got the proof right here—in this folder." He picked up the manila envelope and slapped it against his leg before pitching it back on his desk. "But we know that Letsukov is still in the D.C. area. We've launched a full-scale manhunt for him and his partner, Zoya." His eyes glistened dangerously.

"Oh, my God," Danielle whispered, sinking forward, as the blinding tears came with a rush. "What about my daughter? Is—she in danger, too?"

"We're sending a deputy marshal to stay with your child and housekeeper until this mess is cleared up."

In spite of Danielle's effort to hold her chin steady, it began to wobble again uncontrollably. "Please...can't I just go home?"

Cassidy acted as though she hadn't spoken. "Our top man is on his way up. You'll be under his protective custody in a retreat in the mountains of Virginia while the FBI is combing the

area." He paused, the insistent knock on the door claiming his attention.

"Come in," he bellowed.

Danielle heard the door open but didn't turn around.

"Dammit, Cassidy, I told you to get someone else for this assignment!"

It had been over three years since she'd last heard that voice. Oh, God, no! It couldn't be.

She turned around, positive that her exhausted mind had failed her. But it hadn't. Eyes that were the exact replica of her daughter's stared back at her.

Then his harsh words effectively silenced the silence.

"Dammit to hell, Cassidy, what kind of game are you playing? This woman's not Danielle Davis, she's Erin Richards!"

Keir McBride's rise in the ranks of the U.S. Marshal Service had been swift and sure. He had gained the reputation of being tough as nails and always in charge. But the sight of this woman was almost his undoing.

Her hair was the same. Its fine silvery strands had always reminded him of trapped moonlight and still did. And the graceful lines of her slender body were unmistakable, the way her blouse outlined the gentle curves of her breasts...

Oh, God, why now? he groaned silently. When he had discovered that she was missing three years ago, he had hired the best private detective in the area to track her down. Nothing. She had vanished as though the earth had opened up and swallowed her, leaving a dead silence and a hole in his heart as

big as the Grand Canyon. Damn her to hell!

"McBride, sit down," Luke Cassidy barked, effectively cutting into the heavy silence. "If you'd read her damned file, you'd know what was going on." Then his eyes narrowed shrewdly. "I won't take the time to find out how you two knew each other. That's not important now. But what is important is getting Ms. Davis out of the Washington area."

By sheer force of will Keir removed his eyes from Danielle's face. "Who the hell had a chance to look at a file? I was told to report immediately. I was given the bare facts and nothing more. If you'll remember correctly, you promised me two weeks off." He paused. "And if you'll also remember, I was to have gotten married this week."

Cassidy actually looked disconcerted. "Er... sorry about that, but I promise I'll make it up to you and Natalie when we have that Russian bastard back in our clutches."

Danielle could not head off the horrified moan that escaped through her trembling lips. Questions with no answers began swirling around in her head, making her feel dizzy and disoriented. Surely Keir McBride, the rich playboy and the only son of a renowned senator, could not be a U.S. Marshal? It was ludicrous! Unbelievable!

She had reconciled long ago that she would never lay eyes on this man again. After all, wasn't she a totally new person with a new name, a new life, a new identity? The vision of Ann's tiny face leapt in front of her

face. *Oh, God*, she thought in silent agony, the baby. *Their baby!* The only good that had come out of their affair was the perfect child they had created. She was blinded by sheer mindless terror. What would Keir do if he ever found out about Ann? He must never know....

Keir swung on his heels, his eyes zeroing in on his superior. "Replace me, Luke," he clipped savagely. "Get someone else to take care of Er—I mean..."

"Dammit, man," Cassidy growled, "her name's Danielle. Danielle Davis. Don't forget that again. Surely I don't have to remind you how dangerous a slip like that could be?" Luke Cassidy's eyes narrowed as they bounced back and forth between Danielle's pale figure and Keir's grim, unyielding one. "I don't know what the hell's going on with you two. And furthermore, I don't give a damn. But what I do give a damn about is Ms. Davis's safety." His eyes shifted to Keir. "You're the best man for the job. It's that simple. And I have to think I can depend on you to put personal feelings aside and do what you've been trained to do." He paused. "I'm afraid you two are stuck with each other for the time being, anyway."

*

SHE WAS sitting beside Keir in a blue unmarked Chevrolet on their way to the undisclosed destination in the mountains of Virginia. They had gotten off later than planned, but they'd had to wait for Cassidy's secretary to go shopping and buy Danielle several more articles of clothing. Also Keir

had had to make arrangements for the heat to be turned on in the cabin and food to be delivered. She was aware of him with every fiber of her being.

She shuddered just thinking about the moment in Cassidy's office when Keir had walked into the room. How she had managed to hold herself together was beyond her. Even now she could still hear the violent curses that had followed her out the door and into the adjacent room where she had phoned Jusie and explained her change of plans.

Jusie had been upset, but had assured Danielle that everything would be fine, that Ann was fine but missed her mommy. Having to explain the presence of a U.S. Marshal invading their home had been a different matter altogether. Finally, she convinced Jusie that it was just a precaution and nothing more. And she had prayed that it was true.

With a sigh, she sat forward and began pulling off her coat. It was stifling in the small car. Suddenly a hand shot out behind her and latched onto the collar of her coat while she struggled out of it. She kept her gaze averted, but she felt rather than saw him flinch as his arm grazed her breast.

She had a ridiculous impulse to burst into tears; it was like a nightmare. It couldn't be happening to her. For she had known the minute she saw him, even after three long years, that she had never gotten him out of her system.

A brittle silence settled between them. Against her better judgment, she ventured a look in his direction. The grooves around his mouth were deeply

carved, meant to endure. But the strong defiant chin, square jaw, the black unruly hair now interwoven with silver threads were unchanged. And those same startling green eyes still had the power to drive through her, straight to her soul.

"Why didn't you come and ask me for help?"

Danielle was shocked by his unexpected and startling question. She answered before she thought.

"How could I?" she choked. "You were off on another of your jaunts, taking care of, and I quote, 'important business.'" She made no effort to mask the sarcasm that punctuated each word she flung at him.

Keir sighed deeply. He rubbed his hand wearily across the back of his head. "I only know what Tanner told me when he summoned me to Cassidy's office this morning, and that wasn't much, just the hard cold facts, and he showed me pictures of the Russian agents."

"Oh, Keir, I don't know," she said. "I... I still have terrible dreams, awful nightmares about that horrible day." She twisted her hands together. Her tongue felt weighted with lead. "I... I had decided to stay and work late," she began, her voice low and shaky, "the night after you... you stormed out of my apartment."

She kept her head averted, not wanting to see the dark cloud that she knew would have settled over his face at the mention of that night. "I... I was on my way to the office of my boss, John Elsworth, to get a file. I heard muffled voices. I was about to knock and let my presence be known when I

heard Mr. Elsworth say, 'This highly classified information was just sent over this morning. It's hot stuff and your government had better be willing to pay through the nose for it.' I must have gasped, because both men whirled around and saw me. The...the last thing I remember before turning and tearing back down the hall was the murderous glint in both their eyes."

She paused again, this time to try to control the violent tremor that was racking her body. She sucked her breath deep into her lungs.

"I don't remember ever having been so frightened in my life—" *except when I was having your child all alone*, a hyper little voice inside her head whispered—as I was when I grabbed my purse and raced out of the building only minutes ahead of Elsworth. I jumped into the nearest taxi and told the driver to take me to an out-of-the-way motel. There I registered under a fake name and bolted myself in the room."

She paused a brief second and worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "Every time I heard the slightest noise, I just knew it was Elsworth coming after me. The next morning I went straight to the FBI's office without returning to my apartment. Elsworth had been under surveillance for months on suspicion of selling high technology secrets and endangering the security of the United States. My secret testimony to the grand jury would have put both him and the Russian agent, Letsukov, behind bars for life.

"However, the Russian managed to elude the FBI and suddenly my life was in immediate danger. After that, it was

a living hell." For a moment her voice faltered. She pressed her knees together to stop their shaking. "I decided to cooperate with the FBI and the U.S. Marshal's office, agreeing to disappear with a new identity: a new name, a new job and a new place to live."

"God, Erin..."

"Don't call me that," she hissed, swinging around to face him.

"Old habits die hard," he said harshly. "Why didn't you call me?"

She laughed without mirth. "It was over between us, remember? You had slammed out of my apartment the night before."

"Only because you all but kicked me out." His jaw was clenched to the breaking point. "God, you have no idea what my life was like when you disappeared. I called you the moment I got back to the States." He ignored her whimpered cry and went on, "When the detective I hired was unsuccessful in tracking you down, I chucked everything and went to work full time for the government as a U.S. Marshal doing undercover work."

"What do you mean, full time?" she asked, unable to mask her astonishment.

"The times I pulled my disappearing act, as you called it, I was on special assignment for the government."

Oh, God, she had thought there might be another woman. And for one crazy moment, she had wondered if he was in trouble with the law. But a spy. Never.

"What good is dredging up the past? All we're doing is making matters worse."

If only things could have been different, she agonized silently. If only she hadn't overheard that conversation that had changed her life so completely. If only she had known he had called her that fateful day. If only he wasn't getting married. If only she wasn't harboring the secret of having borne his child. If only... if only...

THE SNOW was coming down thicker and faster now. It took all of Keir's concentration to keep the car on the slick road. The miles from D.C. to his cabin stretched interminably. Not only were the close confines of the car hard to endure, but coupled with the presence of Er...no, dammit, he reminded himself brutally, Danielle.

He turned and looked at her. So soft and pale and lovely, he thought. Was she asleep? Or was she feigning sleep in order to mask her own chaotic emotions?

He forced his eyes back on the winding road. Suddenly his mind became a wilderness of memories and impressions. God help him, but he still could not think of her as Danielle. When he had first met her she had been Erin....

He remembered his father's party as though it had been yesterday. It had been a bore. Too many people crowded into several small rooms.

He ate absently, his eyes moving over the faces—some overly animated, others empty—before coming to rest on a woman in a black dress in the far corner of the room by the door. She stood listening to a tall, earnest-looking man. Every so often her eyes left the face of the man and searched

space for an exit she might discreetly slip through.

She looked soft, Keir thought. Her hair was a fine silvery color, swept away from her face, flattering and emphasizing her exquisite features. She was perfect, Keir decided. He felt less isolated now, having someone to focus on.

The effects of his meeting with his father earlier in the day still clouded his mood. His father, glowering at him from under bushy gray eyebrows, saying, "You're thirty-five. Don't you think it's about time you settled down and quit hopping the globe and got a real job? Dammit, I want to retire, and I want you to take my place in the senate chamber."

Keir's temper was still boiling just thinking about that conversation. It made him furious to think that his father thought he never did an honest day's work in his life. His air-cargo business netted over two million dollars a year. And he enjoyed being the free spirit that he was. His job allowed him to travel all over the world. But more important, it served as a cover so that he could adequately perform his special assignments for the government. A fancy word for spying, he added with a grim twist to his lips. But he could not tell Raymond McBride about these top-secret assignments. He could tell no one.

He shuddered. Why the hell had he given in and come to this party, anyway?

He carelessly thrust aside his empty plate, and when he shifted his gaze, the woman's eyes were on him. Even from a distance he could read the sadness

that tinted their startling blue color. She appeared unhappy, out of place. He'd guess her to be anywhere from twenty-five to thirty years old. She had a graceful neck, narrow waist and hips, lovely slender calves. She fascinated him.

Someone touched him on the arm. He swiveled and when he looked back the woman was lost in the crowd.

He'd had enough. Keir made his way through the crowd, spying the bar, suddenly needing a refill. And after that he planned to go home.

It was the perfume, a rich, heady scent, and then his arm inadvertently pressing into a woman's breasts that alerted him. Raising his eyes, he found he'd collided with the woman in black.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't spill anything on you, did I?"

"No... no, not as far as I can tell," she answered, dipping her head to glance at the front of her dress.

His pulse suddenly elevated. "Sometimes a man will do most anything to break the boredom, even go as far as sloshing a drink on a lady's dress."

She lifted perfectly arched eyebrows. "And is that what you did?"

Keir laughed, both embarrassed and elated. "No, actually it was an accident, but I'm awfully glad it happened, nevertheless."

There was a faint upturn at the corners of her mouth. Adrenaline pumped through his veins like liquid fire, giving him courage.

"It's given me the golden opportunity to talk to you," he said bluntly.

For a moment, she looked disconcerted, then she gave him a begrudging smile. "At least you're honest."

Her smile dazzled him.

"By the way, I'm Keir McBride," he said, a boyish tilt to his lips.

She hesitated a moment as though weighing the consequences of telling him her name.

"I'm Erin Richards," she said.

"Glad to know you, Erin Richards." He smiled at her again. "Are you with someone?" he asked.

She shook her head, lifting the glass to her mouth. "No, that was my boss I was talking to a moment ago."

So she'd been aware of him looking at her. That was a good sign, he told himself. "What brings you to this party?"

"Actually, I had no choice," she answered softly. "I work for the law firm that's hosting this affair and I was told to be here." She appeared suddenly uncomfortable. "But I hate being closed in with all these people."

"My sentiments exactly. Would you like to leave?" he asked, glancing around.

"Yes," she said simply, although she avoided his eyes.

"Tell me all about yourself," he said as they walked down the front path a short time later.

She shrugged, turning her blue eyes on him. A man could lose himself in those eyes, he thought.

"There's not much to tell."

He smiled. "Let me be the judge of that."

She began fingering the strand of pearls around her neck. "Well... I grew up in an orphanage just outside the

city." She paused as though to test his reaction to her confession. When he showed none, she went on. "After leaving the home, I worked my way through college, finally getting a degree in business law. The Elsworth law firm gave me my first job. That was four years ago. I've been there ever since." She smiled. "See, I told you my life was unexciting. I'm a homebody, but I'm happy."

"That's all that counts," he said, looking again at her eyes, and then her mouth.

"And you?"

He sighed, shifting his gaze. "My life's as different from yours as night and day."

She appeared surprised. "Oh, how's that?"

"I'm the controlling partner in an air-freight company, which means I travel a great deal." A grin spread slowly over his mouth. "It's in my blood. I can't seem to settle down for very long at a time."

She frowned. "I couldn't handle that. As I said before, I like my home."

"You sound like my mother. If she and my father had their way, I'd be married with two kids and campaigning for the U.S. Senate seat my father hopes to turn over to me in the near future."

Her frown deepened. "Is Raymond McBride your father?"

"The one and the same."

"I'm impressed. He's a powerful man."

Keir laughed. "He'd love to hear you say that."

She moved like liquid flowing from one point to the next. He wanted to

spend time with her and knock down that wall of reserve. He wanted to hold her slim, soft body and listen, with his eyes closed, to her voice gently breaking the darkness. He wanted someone to relax with, to laugh with, to love.

The next day was the first of many days they spent together. Somehow he had managed to persuade his partner to make his runs, thus freeing him to be with her. He wooed her with flowers, phone calls and long, intimate dinners at her apartment and his.

Then the night he planned to woo her into his bed, he received the dreaded phone call. He left that same day for South America.

The days dragged by, each seeming longer than the other. He thought that he would never get back to her, and when he finally did, he was unsure of his reception.

"Oh, Keir, I thought you'd never get back. I missed you so much," she whispered, tears darkening her eyes.

He crushed her to him, dizzy from relief at having her in his arms. It was pure magic.

"Please... promise me you won't ever leave me again."

He smoothed her silky curls. "Shh, let's not talk about that now. We have something much more important to take care of."

He took her hand in his and led her gently into the bedroom. She looked up at him, her eyes misty and trance-like; he thought he had never seen anything more beautiful.

With graceful precision, they undressed one another, fondling the clothing, the snaps, the buttons, as though everything were flesh.

Her soft plea filled his mouth as he bent toward her. Her body was small and tight around him. He whispered, "Easy, easy," as he felt her muscles relaxing in order to bring him in.

"I... think I'm falling in love with you," he murmured, feeling his carefully built defenses and control systems going haywire.

"I know I love you," she said clearly before moans of pleasure claimed them both, rendering them speechless.

The months thereafter were perfect. Again Keir postponed as many trips as he could in order to be with her. They spent their time loving, laughing and talking, learning about each other.

It was only after he began fulfilling his obligations to his company and to the government once again that their relationship began to deteriorate.

She could not understand why he was gone for long periods of time, and he could not tell her. She always stopped short of nagging him, though she showed her displeasure by retreating into her cold shell, closing him out. She wanted him to give up his air-freight business and get a nine-to-five job. He, on the other hand, wanted her to trust him, to share his life with him the way it was.

He walked into her apartment one evening after he had been gone for two weeks on a dangerous assignment. He was exhausted, yet hungry for the sight of her, hungry to hold her, to make love to her.

She was standing in front of the window, her back to him as the door closed behind him with a click.

"Darling..."

She swung around. He knew the minute he saw the mutinous expression on her face that something was wrong.

"Keir... I don't want you to stay." She clamped down on her lip to still its trembling.

"What... what the hell does that mean?" he demanded harshly, taking a step forward. "Don't do this.... God, we only have tonight as it is." He paused, his breathing hoarse and uneven. "I have to leave again in the morning."

"No! I don't want to hear it." She wrapped her arms around herself like a shield. "I'm tired of sharing you with your work, of never knowing where you are, when you'll be home. I... I can't take it anymore."

"Are you telling me you don't love me?" He closed his eyes, his jaw rigid as a spasm of pain flitted across his face. "Erin," he pleaded, his hand coming toward her. "Dammit, don't do this to us!"

She shrank back against the wall, biting her lip. She shook her head. "We're so different... I'm afraid..." Her voice stopped in her throat. Finally she said quietly, "Sometimes love just isn't enough."

He swore then; violence burned in his voice. "She doesn't want to get involved," he whispered menacingly. "Because it's disturbing. She might have to give up something, make a sacrifice, take a chance. You're a damned fake, Erin."

She turned away. "Please, just go..."

"But then, why should I waste any more of my life on someone who's

afraid to love, to take a chance? May God help you," he said quietly, almost as if he were talking to himself.

He turned and walked out the door and out of her life without another word.

SOMETHING alerted him, drew him sharply out of the chasm of his dark thoughts. He raised his eyes and peered through the rearview mirror. Lines of worry ruled his forehead as a seething oath flew from his lips.

Suddenly he ground down on the gears without mercy. The car lunged forward and around a curve at a daring rate of speed.

Danielle's eyes sprang open. She stared at him, wild-eyed, fright pounding through her veins. "What's wrong?" she cried.

Ignoring her cry, Keir's arm reached over and frantically released the lock on the glove compartment. Danielle watched in shocked disbelief as he pulled out a gun.

She panicked. "Keir, for God's sake!"

"Be quiet and get down." His voice was as cold as steel and just as hard. "We're being followed."

She tried not to stare at the gun, but her eyes were pulled toward it like a magnet. She shivered before slinking down lower in the seat.

If he had kept his mind on his business, he would have spotted them earlier, an inner voice taunted. He shifted his gaze back to the rearview mirror, purposefully blocking from mind Danielle's chalky face and bloodless lips.

He reminded her of an animal, sharp-witted and cunning, who seemed to spring to life when he scented danger. In his own way, Keir was as dangerous as the persons following them.

"Who do you think it is? Letsukov?"

"More than likely, or someone he's hired to do his dirty work."

The lump in her throat seemed to grow larger with each passing second. "What... what are we going to do?" she asked, though how she managed to push the words through her swollen throat was anybody's guess.

Keir did not answer for a moment, but she could feel the sudden tension in him.

Then he spoke grimly. "Try to lose them, if at all possible. I know this highway, and the roads that jut off from it, like the back of my hand. There's a shortcut through to the other highway a few miles ahead, and if I can keep enough in front of them, I can take that cutoff. Between the approaching darkness and the thickening snow, we're certain to be invisible."

"Whatever you think best," she said, twisting her head to stare out the window. Keir was right, the snow seemed to be growing thicker, but thank goodness it wasn't sticking to the road—yet. That would have brought them to a virtual standstill. She watched as it swirled around the headlights like white rain.

"Tighten your seat belt," he ordered crisply, slamming the gun under his leg with his right hand. Then suddenly he pushed down on the gears, doing an intricate dance between brake and accelerator. The car went into a

violent skid turn. Then Keir felt a shudder as the wheels suddenly righted themselves and regained their hold on the highway. He shifted again, building speed, feeling confidence grow with every second.

He had made up his mind in a matter of seconds. He reasoned that it was now or never. He had to lose the car before he reached the cutoff or it would be too late. Damn the blasted snow, he cursed silently as the car slid along the wet, uneven track. But he held his speed, gripping the steering wheel so tightly that every bone in his body felt jammed.

But it paid off. When next he looked in the mirror, the twin beams of the chase car were gone.

"Thank God, we've lost them," Keir said, keeping his eyes glued to the mirror.

Turning toward him, Danielle searched for his shadowed profile. She was amazed at how calm and composed he was. This was a side of Keir McBride she never knew existed. But then, she reminded herself, he had changed. There was a coldness, a hardness within him that had not been there before.

Suddenly Danielle was jarred out of her reverie as Keir made another sharp turn, the car lurching and bumping over potholes.

"Won't they figure out that we've turned off somewhere when they can no longer spot us in front of them?" she asked, trying to ignore the eerie darkness surrounding them while trying to control her rising fear, which refused to be suppressed.

Keir shifted down to a lower gear. "Probably, but there are other roads and cutoffs on both sides of the road. So by the time they turn around and come back to look for us, we'll be long gone."

"What do you think the chances are that they'll find the cabin?" There was a feverish edge to her voice as she sought frantically for his reassurance.

"Slim," he said, bringing the car to a sudden halt. "And you'll see why when we get there. It's easier to get into Fort Knox than anywhere around the cabin." He turned his head around and began craning his neck, looking back toward the highway.

They sat silently listening for the sound of a passing car. Then they heard it, the faint, steady purr of that other car, as it cruised past them.

"What... what do we do now?" Danielle whispered, unable to stand the quiet another moment.

"Pray that the snow still isn't sticking so that we can get through here to the other highway. Hold tight."

He changed gears and nosed the car deeper onto the primitive mountain road. It was a nerve-racking experience. The ground was painfully uneven, strewn with rocks and dotted with branches from fallen trees.

How long they continued on their nightmare journey through the darkness, Danielle could not have said. Suddenly it all seemed to her painfully symbolic of what her future life would be. Barren, lonely, empty, no security, just endless suspense and struggles and misgivings. Certainly no love to brighten the darkness.

"Not much farther now," he said. His voice was deadly calm and matter-of-fact.

She almost hated Keir McBride. How could she have ever felt guilty about keeping Ann a secret from him? This cold, hard, cynical man was not father material. How could he have changed to the point that she hardly recognized him?

Her eyes felt as though someone had thrown a handful of sand in them. Oh, God, she thought, if only she were home with Ann....

"You might as well get some sleep," Keir said at length. "It'll more than likely be dawn now before we reach the cabin, provided we don't run into any more trouble, that is."

Danielle did not bother to answer him. How could she even think about sleep with danger lurking around every corner and her mind a seething caldron of emotions? But she soon found that her battered body had other ideas. Her eyelids began to droop as the warmth enveloped her like a cocoon....

Keir knew when she had fallen asleep. He was glad. No point, in both of them having to suffer a sleepless night.

He shifted his weight in the seat and massaged the tight muscles at the base of his neck. So far so good, he thought, seeing the main road coming into view.

His stomach tied in knots as he eased the car slowly down the deserted stretch of concrete, his ears alert to the slightest unusual sound and his eyes searching through the inky blackness for any signs of company.

He began to analyze the situation, turning it over in his mind, looking at it from every angle. Were they truly out of danger? Was the cabin as impenetrable as he thought?

*

DANIELLE jumped suddenly, as though an alarm had gone off in her brain. She sat up in the seat as if thrust forward by a spring. It took her a moment to realize where she was. But when she turned and saw Keir's haggard face and day's growth of beard, the horror of the past night returned to her.

"I...I take it there was no more trouble," she said hesitantly.

"So far, so good. I hope we've seen the last of our friends."

The house itself was nestled in the side of a mountain, tall pines flocked with snow surrounding it. Danielle knew immediately that this was no ordinary cabin; this was a luxurious tri-level mountain retreat aimed to please, with every conceivable comfort in mind. And it belonged to Keir's family. Was this where he had planned to spend his honeymoon? she wondered when they went inside, sudden nausea sending nasty tingles through her body.

Her room was lovely, decorated in several shades of green with its own bathroom. Out of the corner of her eye, she stared at the bathroom longingly, wanting nothing more than to soak her weary limbs and try to pretend none of this was happening.

"I'm going to scramble eggs and fix toast," he said. "I'll call you when it's ready," he added.

Danielle stared down at her hands. "You go ahead. I... I couldn't eat a thing."

"For God's sake, Danielle, be reasonable!" Keir cupped the back of his neck with his hands as though it ached. Then more huskily, "God, Danielle, you're nothing but skin and bones. How long has it been since you've had a decent meal?"

How could she tell him that she'd never gained her weight back after Ann was born? There had always been so much to do... the responsibility had been so awesome....

He stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

She shuddered in spite of the heat penetrating her limbs. She was still finding it hard to believe that Keir had been an undercover agent for the government before surfacing and becoming a U.S. Marshal. And she hadn't known it. How could she have been so blind?

Would he be willing to change now, especially with a wife in the offing? The muscles in her stomach contracted. She would not think of things like that.

When she walked downstairs, he was sitting at the table drinking a cup of coffee.

They had just sat down and were filling their plates when the unexpected and jarring ring of the phone split the silence. For a moment, they were both disoriented.

"I'll take it in the office." He shoved his chair back, looking down into her upturned face. His look sent the blood pulsing through her veins like warm, heady brandy.

Finally, he jerked himself upright. "Don't let your food get cold," he said in a rough, unnatural voice, before turning and walking out of the room.

Danielle let her breath out slowly. God, what was happening to her? But she knew. She had wanted to touch him so badly that it made her insides shake.

She began concentrating on her food, desperate to banish the image of his long limbs entwined with hers throughout the long nights, their heartbeats as one....

She closed her eyes, fighting for her sanity. When they fluttered open again, he was standing in the doorway. Her heart jumped.

"You... you scared me," she stammered.

"That was Cassidy. Who is Ann?"

She simply gaped at him, soaking in the steely tension of his rigid jaw, the dark flush of fury staining his face. She held on to the table for dear life while she fought back the panic that threatened to suck her under.

When she finally spoke, it was a poor imitation of her own voice. "It's obvious you already know," she said defiantly.

"I want to hear *you* say it." His eyes cut into hers like ice picks.

The tilt of her chin remained firmly upthrust. "She's... she's my daughter."

Keir's sharp intake of breath pierced the air, shattering the moment's silence. He felt his heart twist. She had a child. *His child?* God! "Danielle..." His hands rose and fell in a terrible gesture of despair.

His reaction stunned her. She had never meant to hurt him, but she had. She had cut him to the core, and there was not one damned thing she could do about it. She could not risk telling him the truth. Ann was her life. She could face the agonies of dying a slow death easier than she could face losing her child—even to its father. Especially to its father.

She shut her eyes against the burning question in Keir's.

"Whose child is it?"

Her eyes flew open. "She's mine," she answered defensively, ignoring the erratic beat of her heart.

"I wouldn't advise you to play games with me." His voice had a menacing edge to it. "If she's not mine, then whose is she?" His face darkened, taking on a sinister glint.

"Mine!" Danielle repeated in an angry tone. She turned her back on him.

She was totally unprepared for the next attack.

"What did you do, run straight into some other poor unsuspecting bastard's arms and have the baby?"

Hot fury loosened her tongue. "You'll never know the answer to that question, will you?" she goaded, her voice rising with every word she uttered. "Because I'll never tell you! No matter what I said, you'd still blame me."

His eyes narrowed and cut into her like blades. Then with a muttered oath, he turned around, swinging his tough, rangy body as if it were on ball bearings, and walked stiffly into the den.

"Get out of my sight," he hissed, "before I do something that will cause us both to be sorry."

Danielle lost no time in making good her escape. But when she reached the top of the stairs, she stopped and turned around. Keir had not moved. His back was still to her, his shoulders hunched, seemingly more exhausted than she, as if his enormous strength had failed him.

TWO DAYS passed. It was as if a cold war existed between them, each fighting to come to terms with misery.

His hard, closed face followed her wherever she went. But what gnawed at her relentlessly was that she found herself *wanting* to know where he was, what he was doing. In spite of the tension between them she wanted to be near him.

With a disgruntled shake of her head, she pulled herself out of her musings and stood up, deciding that she had time to take a shower before going downstairs.

A short time later, her task complete, she was making her way back into the bedroom when the door of her room opened without warning and Keir stood on the threshold staring at her.

"What do you want?" she asked huskily, holding the sides of her robe together.

His hand was locked around the holster of his snub-nosed pistol. Numbing terror washed through Danielle's body, threatening to stop her heartbeat. "What... what is it? Is it Ann?"

"It's John Elsworth. Cassidy says they found him in his cell this morning. He was murdered."

"Oh, no," she whimpered, putting her balled fist up to her mouth. Her insides began to shake. She was the only one who could identify Letsukov.

"It's not as bad as it sounds," Keir said softly, seeing fear pinch her features. "First thing, they don't know where we are, and the second thing, they have to go through me to get to you." His voice and eyes reminded her of cold steel.

She swallowed against the lump in her throat and nodded weakly.

Keir stared at her, taking in her pale solemn face. She looked so vulnerable, so haunted. He had never felt protective of a woman before, not even Danielle when he'd first met her. And certainly not Natalie; his attitude toward her was like that of an older brother. But there was nothing of that in his feeling for Danielle; there never had been. He wanted her so badly it was ripping his insides to shreds. *But you're not going to touch her, damn you! Get a hold of yourself. Do your job. Forget everything else.*

He inwardly railed at Cassidy for having gotten him into this fiasco, himself for having broken the first rule and becoming personally involved. Again. For whether he wanted to admit it or not, he *was* involved—had been since the moment he walked into Cassidy's office and saw her sitting there.

DANIELLE SAT straight up in the bed. Her heart was pounding wildly, and her mouth was so dry that it hurt to

swallow. Was it her own cry that had awakened her? Her shoulders shook violently as uncontrollable sobs pounded her body.

She wasn't even aware that she was no longer alone until she felt the mattress sag beside her. She jerked her head back and stared into Keir's deeply troubled eyes.

"Are you all right?" he whispered, a jagged note to his voice. "I heard you cry out."

Danielle shivered. "I... was dreaming... a nightmare." She gulped. "It was awful. I... dreamed about John..." She couldn't go on.

"Shh, don't cry," he soothed, her tears cutting him to pieces. "It was just a dream, nothing more." For a moment, his hands closed over her bare shoulders. His groan penetrated the silence. He dug his fingers into the palms of his hands to keep from pulling her into his arms. "I'd better go now."

"Please... don't go." She swayed toward him. "I don't want you to leave me. I... know what it'll mean if you stay, but I don't care." She loved him, had never stopped loving him. And right now she thought that she'd surely die if he didn't hold her.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "Once I touch you... it'll be too late."

She put out her hand, and he caught it, turning her palm against his lips. The moist softness of his mouth against her skin set her insides on fire. It had been so long.

He closed both arms around her, the beat of their hearts throbbing in unison. He placed his mouth against her

lips, softly, tenderly. She tasted of tears.

"Oh, please love me," she pleaded.

With quick, adept fingers he removed her gown, feeling her fingers pressing hard into his flesh. He lay down beside her, his body pressing warmly against her.

His mouth touched her everywhere. His hands caressed her sweetly, familiarly, following the hungry quest of his lips. She melted like hot wax against his aroused body, kissing him deeply.

When he entered her it was swift and frantic. She arched her back and began to move slowly, sensuously. He clung to her hips, joining her in her movement, lifting her, kneading her flesh as he accelerated to meet her in this extraordinary incidence of simultaneous timing. He knew in that moment that he had never stopped loving her.

They fell sideways, still joined, and lay panting, breathing in the air from each other's lungs.

"Oh, Danielle," he whispered.

She held on to him, unable to speak. He was her fortress where she could hide. His shoulders, chest and arms formed a shelter in which she could rest safe from her fears. She did not want it to end. Ever.

He held her tighter, spreading himself about her like a protective shell.

They slept. They pushed aside the danger that surrounded them, forgot that time was their number-one enemy.

IT WAS a truly incredible day. The heavens were an incredible blue, making the sky appear solid, the snow-covered mountaintops so sharp and vivid, the craggy outline of each rock and tree so distant.

"How does it feel to be a lady of leisure?" Keir asked, swinging the ax as though it were made of air instead of steel.

She smiled at the teasing glint in his eyes. He paused, supporting himself on the handle of his ax and looking at her.

"I'll just sit here on the porch, soaking up this wonderful clean air and sunshine and watch while you slave away." A smile teased her lips.

How long she sat there she didn't know. Keir showed no signs of tiring, nor did she tire of watching him. It was as though his big, brawny body were made of iron, the way he split one log after the other, stopping only long enough to stack them. She was mesmerized by his display of untiring strength. And he was so good to look at.

She never knew, could not remember later what made her suddenly turn and stare off into the distance. But it was that small unconscious action that saved her life.

Lurking on the mountainside adjacent to them, a man was scurrying around, a rifle wagging in his hand.

For a moment—stunned—she couldn't react. Then she raised wild, rounded eyes to Keir, stretched her arm toward him in a silent plea.

As if aware of her panic, Keir whirled around. It was then that he caught his first glimpse of the metal flashing in the bright sunlight. He heard the brittle, echoing crack of a shot, heard wood splinter behind him on the tree opposite Danielle.

"Danielle! Get down!" he screamed, slinging the ax aside before ducking and crawling on his hands and knees, dragging his rifle with him. "Danielle! Are you all right?"

"I... think so," she whispered.

Keir reached for his rifle and cocked it, looking at his target, an evil glint in his eye.

"When I give you the signal, you crouch down and run like hell." He then rolled over on his stomach and began firing. "Now! Run!"

She ran.

Keir did not let up until he saw Danielle reach the side door of the lodge, frantically yank open the door and dart through it.

She was sobbing openly now, beside herself with fright for Keir. *Oh, God, please, don't let anything happen to him. Please not because of me.*

From where she was standing she could see Keir stop to reload.

He was alive! Thank God, he was alive. There were no more sounds of gunfire to disturb the uneasy, eerie silence that now filled the air.

THEY WERE huddled in front of the simmering fireplace, the sunlight having succumbed to the full moon and twinkling stars. It would soon be time to make their move. They had to get to the helicopter Keir's family kept at the lodge for emergencies and get away

before their tormentor or tormentors returned. Keir had no way of knowing yet if he had fatally wounded the sniper. But there was no doubt in his mind that they were no longer safe in the lodge. He had gone to the phone to get an emergency coded message to Cassidy. But lifting it off the hook, he hadn't been surprised at what he'd heard: nothing. The lines had been cut. They were on their own.

Danielle's eyes dipped to the revolver lying on the hearth only a hairsbreadth away from his right hand. Close to his heavy booted foot and resting on his thigh was a long-barreled rifle. Looking at those menacing objects, she was again reminded of the dangerous game they were playing. A game of cat and mouse with high stakes—their lives.

She recoiled, whipping her eyes away from the guns.

"It's time to go," he said. There was a brittle, controlled edge to his voice.

Getting up, Danielle marshaled every bit of self-discipline she possessed to keep her mind clear. She would not be a burden to him. But the thought of slipping through the inky blackness trying to get to the helicopter made her limbs knock with sheer terror. However, she let none of this show as she faced him.

Yet Keir was aware of her fear. It was so strong that it was almost tangible. He glanced at her, taking in the lovely picture she made standing straight as an arrow, her shoulders squared stubbornly.

"Atta girl," he said, his voice having suddenly gone hoarse. Then he

touched her hand, and she followed him wordlessly out the door.

Danielle was positive that she did not breathe the entire time they stole through the dark, cloudy night. The moaning wind whipping through the bare treetops was the only sound between them.

It wasn't until Danielle slammed the door of the helicopter shut behind her that she breathed.

Wasting no time, Keir began flipping toggle switches on and off, checking needles and dials. He gave her a reassuring smile. A few seconds later the blades overhead began making a whop, whop, whop noise. The helicopter rose swiftly in the cold Virginia night.

"Are you going to try and contact Cassidy?" Danielle asked, her heart no longer palpitating.

Keir raked a hand over his hair. "I'm tempted, but I'm afraid to break radio silence. Once they realize we're airborne they'll tune in to our radio frequency. I'm going to fly us to our training camp where I know you'll be safe."

She kept telling herself that she was no longer afraid.

"Why do you think they weren't waiting for us?"

Keir looked grim. "It's my guess they're operating one man short now and have probably gone back to regroup."

Danielle shivered and fell silent.

A short time later Keir tightened his knuckles around the wheel, feeling them almost snap in two under the pressure. It wasn't his imagination; the controls were jamming.

"We're losing pressure!"

Danielle's features mirrored her disbelief. "We're going to crash?"

"No, but I'm going to have to set her down. Now!"

"But...but how? It's dark...the mountains..."

The terror had begun again.

He could feel the sweat beneath his arms, running down his sides. He knew that under the weight of the grip he was exerting on the lever, his hand was shaking fiercely. Quickly he adjusted his airspeed, at the same time checking the hydraulic circuit breaker. He was right. The sign flashed: OUT—hydraulic failure confirmed.

He switched to manual override. Next he reached over and flipped on the bottom landing lights, searching desperately for a place big enough to land.

"Keir, are we going to make it?" Her voice shook.

His face grew black with determination. "You're damned right," he snapped.

Danielle's eyes were glued straight ahead, her hands digging into the seat as Keir continued to fight the lever. It seemed like forever, but in actuality it was only minutes before he guided it onto a flat strip sandwiched between two mountains. Her heart was in her throat as she felt the helicopter make contact with the hard ground.

"Do...do you think they'll be waiting for us?"

He hesitated, his heart still knocking. "Probably," he answered honestly.

"SIR, ARE WE going to make our move now? Join the FBI?"

Luke Cassidy swung around. "We don't have any choice, especially after what we've just learned." Cassidy's features were bleak. "A forest ranger sighted a chopper in the mountains not far from McBride's lodge. We wouldn't have thought about it except on the forest ranger's radio frequency they picked up a scrambled message from what sounded like two Russians. One was demanding help while referring to their target being in range."

He paused. "It's just been confirmed that McBride's chopper is definitely gone from the lodge. We're leaving at first light."

Cassidy walked to the door, yanked it open and turned around. "Meeting adjourned, gentlemen."

THE SHACK appeared deserted. All the same, he couldn't be too cautious.

Keir tromped carefully through the trees, glancing around him. Since he had found the shack, they could have, too, and since this was the only one nearby, they could have easily guessed that this was where they might come for shelter.

Up above Danielle was waiting. He had to hurry. Danielle couldn't make it much farther. From the moment they had left the chopper at dawn, stiff, freezing cold and hungry, they had been on the move.

He bolted over to the side of the shack, stopped, pressed himself flush with the building, peered around the corner, gun raised.

No one.

Then he placed his ears next to the shuttered window for any sound from there. Hearing nothing, he angled in through the door, gun ready.

Deserted.

It was a moment before he relaxed enough to move, breathing slowly. Then going to the door, he waved for Danielle to come down.

He met her halfway.

WHILE KEIR reached for a weak and trembling Danielle, three men with binoculars watched them from the top of the opposite mountain peak. And when the two weary figures turned and made their way back toward the shack, one man let the glasses fall to his chest and took a sip of cold coffee from a cardboard container while watching the door of the shack close.

THEY WERE both aware of the quiet darkness and of the sleet as it continued to fall on the tin roof. A hint of something hung in the air between them, a sense of waiting.

Three o'clock in the morning found them hovered around the fire. Danielle's eyes were closed, her head resting in the curve of his arm. He stared into her face, an ache around his heart seized by love for her.

Her face. He could spend the rest of his life sitting here looking at her face. Lovely woman with her delicate features, fragile eyelids lined with the finest threads of violet, the curve of her cheek, her jaw, her throat....

"Hey," he said suddenly, snapping his mind back to the moment at hand. "Hey, don't go to sleep on me now."

With the dawn came the knowledge they were no longer alone. Keir was never quite sure what followed—Danielle's scream or the small explosion that blew apart the left front window. Two bullets had whacked close together into the wall beside him.

"Dammit, they're out there. Get down," he ordered before crashing to the floor.

The wind was shrieking outside; snow was gusting in through the shattered window, bullets splitting the air.

He flung his arms around Danielle, seizing her with all his might, holding her crushed against his chest.

Her lips shook violently as she tried to speak. "What... God... what are we going to do?" she whispered, clinging to him.

Keir reached for his rifle behind Danielle, while slamming the pistol in her hand. His eyes found and locked on the back door that was in reaching distance of his foot. Deliverance. Maybe. Better than nothing.

Cupping her cold face between his hands, he forced her shocked eyes to meet his. "When I shove open the door, I want you to take off. Whatever you do, don't stop shooting as you run toward the woods. I won't be far behind you."

Positioning her hands on the trigger, still crouched, he slammed his boot against the door, shoving it open.

"Go!"

With her mind completely divorced from her body, Danielle darted through the door, struggling to fire the

pistol. She battled the snow, spotting a clump of trees to her right. Sobbing, her chest heaving, bullets dancing through the air, she pushed on, sometimes stumbling, sometimes not. How long she ran she didn't know.

Then suddenly she stopped dead in her tracks.

Her heart slammed into her throat.

A man's booted feet blocked her path.

Fear rendered her motionless. *Oh, God, I'm going to die after all.*

She forced down the scream and, slowly defeated, she raised her eyes.

"Thank God, you're alive."

She fell in a dead faint into Luke Cassidy's arms.

KEIR SAW the man follow Danielle, cutting across the snow. Keir halted, spun around, dropped to the ground, rifle aimed, and shouted, "Zoya, take another step and you're dead!"

Then suddenly from another angle, a bullet whizzed by his head. Lunging to the side, Keir leveled his rifle and fired. Zoya dodged. His bullet only grazed him. Stumbling, Zoya continued to follow Danielle's path.

An expletive flew from Keir's lips simultaneously with another bullet whining past his ear, forcing him to seek cover. Dammit, he cursed again silently. If only he could see where the shots were coming from or how many there were to contend with.

"Come out, McBride. You're covered," a heavily accented voice shouted.

Keir didn't bother answering. He slipped, slid and scrambled in the snow, hoping to circle to the rear. He

thought of Danielle in Zoya's clutches and did not pause to catch his breath. With luck, he'd get one clean shot.

As soon as Keir spotted Letsukov, a beefy arm circled Keir's throat and lifted him high off the ground. He felt the tightening of that forearm on his windpipe. Kicking back, Keir smashed his heel hard into a kneecap. The goon fell with a thud as he released Keir.

Taking advantage, Keir spun and aimed his foot for the point of the man's jaw.

Crunch!

That one blow was all it took. The man lay sprawled facedown in the snow, out cold.

A sharp sting in his side doubled Keir over. Letsukov's laugh filled the air. Using the beefy man's inert body as a shield, Keir rolled over behind him, clutching his side. He scrambled for his gun, growing weaker by the moment.

He saw the feet before he saw the face.

"Surely you didn't think you could outsmart us, McBride." Letsukov's voice held an icy sneer. Raising his gun, he pointed it at Keir's head and laughed. "Too bad you won't be around to watch Ms. Davis suffer the same fate."

Reacting instinctively, a strangled cry erupting from his lips, pain blinding him, Keir came up and rammed against the man.

He heard it then. The sharp crack of a rifle. *Oh, God, please, not Danielle!*

Letsukov slouched on top of him just as he seemed to hear a voice, distant and high, and feel a hand on his shoulder, pulling at him....

He knew no more as a sweet darkness sucked him under.

*

DANGLING HER FEET off the edge of the bed, Danielle stared at the cream-paneled walls just as she had the day before and the day before that. An unbearable loneliness consumed her. Why couldn't she get hold of herself? Why couldn't she be thankful that she was back home with Ann and Jusie? Why couldn't she be thankful that her life had been spared? Why couldn't she be thankful that the nightmare was over, that she was out of danger?

But she *was* thankful, she argued. Thankful for everything, but— It was the "but" that was her problem, that was filling her days and nights with mental anguish and despair. She had not heard from Keir.

Since she had boarded the plane for home, she had lived in silent agony. Thoughts of Keir filled her heart and mind every single moment of every single day. Oh, she knew that physically he was going to be all right. He was recovering from his wound satisfactorily. Cassidy had assured her of that each time she had spoken with him by phone. And he had also assured her that both Letsukov and Zoya would never bother her again, nor would their sidekick. And that once she came to Washington and gave her deposition, she would never hear from the U.S. Marshal's office again.

Still, nothing relieved the pain of not hearing from Keir. Was she wrong? Had she just imagined that he still loved her? Had he gone home, married his fiancée? No. She would not,

could not, believe that. She had seen the look in his eyes; she had seen love.

And when she did hear from him, what then? Would he forgive her when he learned about Ann? And if so, would they be able to overcome their other differences? Would he be willing to change? To give up his dangerous job?

KEIR WALKED slowly across the grounds. He'd been at his parents' estate outside D.C. for a few days now. His stay in the hospital had turned into almost a month due to an unexpected bout with pneumonia. But he was stronger now, much stronger.

Cassidy was still clucking over him like a mother hen, as were his parents and...Natalie, until yesterday, that is. Had it been just yesterday that he had told her he couldn't marry her? The words simply spilled from his lips, and with them a heavy burden fell from his heart. Oddly enough, they had parted friends.

Yet his misery was immense. Even now, his aimless wanderings did nothing to help him. He thought distance would help. Distance, he expected, would make him free. But it hadn't. The merest thought of Danielle made his pulse race. She was inside him, in his head and in his heart.

DANIELLE FELT much better, her heart lighter, having unburdened herself to Jusie. She had told her everything, except of course those intimate moments she had shared with Keir. They were too private, too sacred to share, even with her beloved friend. Some things were better left unsaid.

It had been over a month. Could she have been wrong in thinking he still cared? No! She would not think about that. Not now. It was a beautiful day and she was headed home after shopping.

She parked the car in the driveway and scooped up her packages in her arms. Then carefully she made her way to the door, opened it and began climbing the stairs. "Jusie, Annie, I'm home," she called.

Silence.

Frowning, she crossed the threshold into the family room, only to freeze suddenly in her tracks.

"Oh, God!" she mouthed as the packages fell from her arms and scattered across the floor.

Keir, his massive body filling the rocking chair to capacity, was sitting by the fireplace rocking a sleeping Ann. The child's dark curls were tumbling across his muscled arm.

Keir looked up at her, tears clinging to his thick lashes. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She stood motionless. Seeing father and daughter together for the first time, the likeness uncanny, it hit her squarely between the eyes what he must be feeling at this moment, knowing that he had been deprived of the first years of their child's life. The room began swaying.

"It's going to be all right, you know," he whispered, smiling through his tears.

"Oh, Keir," she groaned. Broken sobs began pelting her body, robbing her of speech.

Keir rose slowly, and clutched his precious burden against him. "Please

don't... I can't stand to see you cry. Show me her room, and I'll put her down," he said. His voice trembled fiercely.

Wordlessly, Danielle preceded Keir out of the family room, down the hall to Ann's room. She stood by helplessly as Keir strode across the room and gently laid Ann's relaxed body on the bed.

"She's perfect," he murmured.

Danielle uttered a faint, choked sound as if she had attempted to speak and found her voice gone.

He left the room and she followed him.

In the den he stopped and faced her. "God in heaven, if only one could turn back the pages," he whispered, his voice raspy, broken.

"It's too late. One can never do that," she said gently, keeping her own tears at bay by the greatest of effort.

They looked at each other; Danielle's heart began to throb, Keir's hands closed until the knuckles were white and the fingernails bit into his palms.

He smiled through his tears. "No, my darling, it's not too late. Not for us."

"Keir. I..." Unconsciously, her head began to weave from side to side. "I'm sorry, so sorry," she whispered.

He turned toward her then and folded her within his arms. He held her as though he'd never let her go, but still he did not say what she so desperately craved to hear, that he loved her and wanted to marry her, that he wanted to make a home for her and Ann.

After a moment, she lifted her eyes, searching for his, unable to hold in any

longer what was in her heart, her soul. "I... I love you," she said.

He stared down at her, his beautiful eyes a darker and more intense green than she had ever seen them before. Then he kissed her with passion, hunger and need.

"Oh, Danielle, Danielle," he whispered against her lips, "there are thousands of things I want to hear, to ask, about Ann—us, but right now all I want to do is make love to you, to show you how much I love you, how much I've missed you, how my life these past weeks has been hell without you."

"Me, too," she echoed softly. "But Jusie! Where is Jusie? We...can't...I mean..."

He leaned over and kissed the tip of her pert nose, drinking in the fresh fragrance of her skin, her hair. "Don't worry about Jusie. She's gone to visit friends. For the night. She wanted to make sure we had plenty of time alone." He grinned. "We had quite a conversation."

"You're crazy, you know," she said breathlessly.

"Crazy about you." He bent down and scooped her up in his arms. She seemed weightless, and he felt as if he could lift the earth.

In her bedroom they took their time undressing each another, stopping to kiss and touch, finally lying down on the bed together.

He circled her nipples with his tongue, bathing them in the dew of his mouth, causing her to suck in her breath with exquisite pain. Her hand fell lightly on the back of his head to keep him there.

"Oh, Keir, I can't believe you're here, touching me like this," she whispered, opening under him, drawing him down to her.

"I love you so much." He traced a finger down her thigh.

"And I love you. Oh!" She quivered as his fingers dipped into her. "Keir!"

She placed her hands between them, guiding him forward. But she no longer needed to direct him. He was there, parting her, entering, his hands caressing her breasts as he knelt between her thighs and immersed himself fully into her, then stopped, resting there. She raised her arms and brought him up to her breasts, anxious to please, to love him.

His hips shifted, beginning a counterpoint, playing a melody that was perfectly timed to his slow-thrusting theme. He held her, filled her more completely, more perfectly than ever before.

"You're perfect," he whispered.

She closed her eyes as he moved inside her, stirring something deep, something profound, something so wonderful that a soft dying cry came from his mouth. She shuddered and clung to him moaning softly, her eyes still tightly shut as she rose, then fell, gasping. A minute later, as the last of the spasms were passing, she felt his climax.

"I'm so happy," she said, a long time later.

"All I want," he said as he caressed her arm, "is for you to be happy."

He held her warmly in the crook of his arm. After a moment of contented silence, he confessed softly, "You

know, you've never been off my mind. I kept finding you in every revolving door."

"I've never been without you," she answered, turning toward him with her heart in her eyes.

Thus began a play in separate acts with intermissions of kissing, talking and touching.

He told her about Natalie, how she was a substitute for her, that she was a wonderful person but he had never loved her. She spoke of the loneliness she had endured after they parted. He wanted to know the details of Ann's birth, and she told him.

After they had emptied their souls, they lay close together, arms wrapped tightly around one another. They fell into a deep sleep.

DANIELLE LOVINGLY glanced at a happy Ann, who straddled Keir's knee, egg mixed with grape jelly staining her cherub face. Then she raised her eyes, and they collided with Keir's brilliant green ones.

"Your daughter's a little pig, no doubt about it," Keir said, running his big hand through Ann's curls affectionately.

Danielle merely stood there, her heart swelled with love and pride at the picture father and daughter created together. With Jusie nowhere in sight, it was obvious that Keir had opted to feed and bathe Ann while she slept.

"Hungry?" he drawled, helping a squirming Ann down from his lap. "Sit down, and I'll prepare you a McBride special."

Danielle laughed, scooping her daughter up in her lap and giving her

a squeeze. "Give Mommy a kiss then go get your coloring book and colors and show Dad...Keir...how well you can color."

"When are we going to tell her?" Keir asked a moment later as they watched their happily occupied daughter in the corner of the den.

"I'm...ready when you are."

He dipped his head and gave her a searing kiss. Pulling back, he whispered, "Let's get married. Today. This morning. Doesn't that sound like heaven?"

"Like heaven," she echoed into his mouth. Now, she thought, now he would tell her what she longed to hear, that he would give up his dangerous job, find work here in Texas, never leave her and Ann alone again.

"But we won't be able to leave right away. There's so much we have to take care of before we can go back to D.C."

The sudden businesslike tone of his voice sent a cold chill of foreboding through her. She raised her head to look at him. "Leave?"

"Of course." He rushed on. "We'll stay here until we can find a suitable buyer for the store, and Jusie—well, if she wants to go with us, I..."

Pushing him away, she lunged to her feet. "What?" Then before he could answer her she went on, shaking her head in bewilderment. "Leave? But why? I...I thought...I mean," she stammered, suddenly feeling as though she were foundering alone in the middle of the ocean in a life-raft that had sprung a leak.

"Danielle, honey, what's wrong?" he asked, taking in her pale features. "I don't understand."

"Well, apparently neither do I," she whispered. "It's...it's just that I thought now that you wouldn't be working for the government any longer, we wouldn't have to leave." Her voice had dwindled almost to nothing.

The silence that fell over the room was formidable.

"I'm sorry if I gave you that impression," he said coldly, "but I have no plans to give up my work."

The silence stretched endlessly.

"I...I haven't changed, Keir," she said, unchecked tears beginning to trickle down her hollow cheeks. "I still want a real home, white picket fence and all for me...for Ann. And a husband who will always be there, not one who's constantly chasing danger."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but this conversation sounds awfully familiar to me." Keir's tone showed evidence of the strain on his control.

"I won't deny that," she snapped at him. "But my God, Keir, after what we've just been through, what do you expect?" A shudder tore through her body. "I...I thought we'd be a real family." She choked back a sob. "If you're gone all the time, that's not being a family," she wailed.

He wanted to touch her so badly he could taste it, but something held him back. Something he couldn't name. Suddenly she seemed untouchable. His heart skipped a fearful beat.

"In the first place I won't be gone all the time," he reasoned. "And in the second place nothing is going to happen to me. You've got to believe that." His tone was pleading now. "Anyway, I have responsibilities, obligations to

people other than myself. They depend on me. Right now, they're waiting on me to head an undercover operation that, if successful, could keep the Russians from walking off with any more of our technological secrets. I can't just back away from that."

"No. I guess you can't," she said bitterly.

"I love you and want to marry you. Isn't that enough?"

"How can you say that," she cried. "I love you, but I can't... I won't live with the shadow of fear. Not anymore."

He felt sick on the inside, sick that he was losing her. *Oh, God, not again*, he cried silently.

"Danielle," he reasoned patiently. "I know you've been through a living hell, but that's all over now. Put it behind you. We have a wonderful future in front of us. Don't throw it away. Let go of the fear, once and for all. Lean on me—trust me."

She answered him with silence, turning her back.

"All right, Danielle, you win. I won't fight you anymore. If living in a vacuum will make you happy, then so be it."

The door slammed shut behind him, shattering her heart into tiny pieces. She crumpled to the floor, too numb to cry.

*

SINCE HE HAD walked away without a backward glance over three weeks ago, she had tried to exorcise him from both her heart and mind, but thoughts of their parting and his bitter words con-

tinued to torment her soul. Fate had sent him to her, and she had sent him away. Dammit, if she didn't know better, she would say she was pining away.

Suddenly it dawned upon her that a home, family, roots were meaningless without Keir. He was her roots. Without him life had no meaning. To be completely fulfilled she needed Keir. Even though she dearly loved Ann, she could not replace Keir in her life. Nor could she deprive Keir from being a father to her child. She knew that now.

She realized, too, that it no longer mattered what he did for a living. He could be a government agent for the rest of his life if that would make him happy. It was no longer important. But accepting him, and loving him for what he was, was the important thing. She had made a grave error in trying to change him.

Jumping up, a brilliant smile changing her features, she cried jubilantly, "Washington, D.C., here I come!"

DANIELLE WAS nervous, but somehow she reached the door and pushed the bell.

Nothing.

Please, oh, please, be home, she cried silently.

The door opened, but it wasn't Keir who stood on the threshold, but a strange woman with a coat and purse draped over her arm.

"May I help you?" the woman asked formally.

Danielle circled her lips with her tongue. "Yes... uh... is Keir... Mr. McBride here?"

The woman—housekeeper more than likely, Danielle thought—raised her hand to push back a stray silver curl. “No, he isn’t, not at the moment.”

“When . . . when do you expect him back?”

“Not sure, ma’am.”

“Would it be all right if I came in and waited for him? You see, I’m from out of town and I came especially to see him.”

The woman looked both skeptical and uneasy. “I don’t know, ma’am, I’m just leaving and I don’t . . .”

“Oh, please,” Danielle rushed on, a desperate note in her voice. “I’m a . . . friend. The name’s Danielle Davis, and I’ve traveled a long way. I must see him.”

The woman’s kindly, wrinkled face was showing signs of weakening. She opened the door wider. “Mr. McBride has mentioned you.” She smiled, taking in Danielle’s pale, drawn features, then looked at her watch. “I have to go now. Have to pick up my grandbaby at the nursery. There’s a bar in the den if you want something to drink and there’s a cozy fire in the fireplace. Make yourself comfortable.”

Danielle forced herself to smile. “Thank you.”

Danielle, familiar with her surroundings, made her way into the den. She went to stand by the fire. But she didn’t tarry there long. Jumpy as a cat on a hot tin roof, she began pacing the floor. *Fool! Life doesn’t give third chances*, she thought.

She had to leave, to get out of there before he came home. But her legs re-

fused to cooperate. They were threatening to buckle beneath her.

Then just as she took a tentative step forward, she heard the front door open and close. She stood helpless, unable to move, unable to speak.

“Danielle!”

He stepped closer as though he, too, had seen a ghost.

“Are you real?” he whispered. “I was planning to leave tonight for Texas to tell you . . .” He paused on a ragged note. “To tell you that I can’t live without you, no matter what.”

Her mind was reeling. Had she really held this haggard-looking man in her arms? She had tried to negotiate with the person in charge of the universe to get Keir back. And now she was hearing the words she had longed to hear. She was afraid her heart would burst with happiness.

Keir put his arms around her, tightly, as though he would never let her go, and she was content to hold him and hear his heart beating. No other emotion could equal her love.

“Love me,” she whispered, meeting his eyes, touching the gaunt shadows in his face as if to prove to herself that he wasn’t a mirage.

He closed his eyes, his mouth shaking. “Oh, God, Danielle, darling, I love you so much and want you so much. For a while there I didn’t trust my ability to stay sane.”

“Oh, Keir,” she said, “I felt the same way. Nothing seemed to matter if I couldn’t have you.”

His hold tightened. “My darling, my love,” he said deeply.

Danielle sought the words to tell him what was weighing heavily on her

heart. "I... I want you to know that it no longer matters to me what you do for a living," she said. "I'll support you one hundred percent, even if you're gone five days out of seven."

"Oh, my darling, you're priceless," he said, worshipping her with his eyes. "And you don't know how much your saying that means to me. But I have a confession to make. I had just come back from Cassidy's office, having told him I wanted a desk job, effective immediately."

Danielle gasped, causing him to pause with a sweet smile.

"I'm through trotting the globe, as you so aptly put it. Can you ever forgive me for being such a headstrong and selfish bastard, demanding you give up everything, but not willing to make any sacrifices myself? Life wasn't worth living without you."

"We're so lucky," she whispered, "to have been given a third chance."

"Marry me."

"Whatever you say."

Suddenly his face clouded again. "Would you mind very much living in D.C. part of the year, since my office is here? Maybe you could open up a bookstore here. I know how much your work means to you."

"We'll see, my love," she said. "But right now all I want is to be with you, no matter where it is."

Before he could say another word, Danielle locked her arms around his neck and kissed him, her lips filled with love and promise.

"Home, my darling, is where the heart is," he pledged softly, "and my heart is yours forever."






**VICKI
LEWIS
THOMPSON**
As Time Goes By



Sarah Melton and Cliff Hamilton might have been history-club buddies at high school, but their social circumstances kept them apart. Until one day, some ten years later, when fate took a hand.



Despite the blood, Sarah recognized Cliff Hamilton immediately.

"Head wound," the paramedic said. "Got kicked by a horse over at Fort Lowell. Doctor wants a skull series pronto."

"Coming up." Sarah forced herself not to think at all as she maneuvered the X-ray unit into the brightly lit room. Coincidence had never brought someone she knew into the Tucson Medical Center emergency room.

Cliff's muscular body barely fit on the white-sheeted gurney; his Civil War uniform completed the absurd picture. After ten years, Sarah couldn't believe they'd met again under such bizarre circumstances.

Sarah lifted troubled brown eyes to the paramedic. "Is he conscious?"

Cliff's warm breath touched her cheek. "Yes, but his head hurts like hell."

At once her gaze dropped to the blue eyes she remembered. They were dull, not clear and sparkling with humor as they had been on that long-ago graduation night. She checked for dilation of his pupils and breathed a sigh of relief when they appeared normal. Recognition flickered in his eyes then. "This is going to sound like a line, but don't I know you?"

He remembered. "Yes, you do, but this is no time for Old Home Week. Lie still."

The paramedic lifted an eyebrow. "You know this guy?"

"Yes."

"Is he a Hollywood actor?"

"No."

"Then I guess he's an extra. Doesn't it seem funny working on a guy wearing a cavalry uniform? There's another one in the waiting room. I keep expecting the Indians to attack."

"All the hostiles have been taken care of," Cliff mumbled. "It's safe to plow your fields."

Sarah glanced at the paramedic. "Has he been babbling like this for long? He could be hallucinating."

Cliff said, "Not a chance, Marvelous Melton."

"*Marvelous Melton?*" The paramedic grinned.

"Cut it out, Dan." Sarah positioned the film cassette. "We went to high school together, that's all."

"And she's second only to me in presidential trivia," Cliff added. "Who was Millard Fillmore's wife, Sarah?"

"Abigail Powers," she answered.

"See? She's still got it."

The paramedic shook his head. "Thank God. I've been lying awake nights trying to remember who married old Millard."

"Dan, get lost."

"And miss all the fun?"

"This one's easy, Sarah," Cliff continued. "What was Garfield's middle name?"

"You've got to be quiet, Cliff."

"I will. Just answer that one question."

"Abram," she said with a sigh of exasperation. "I'm going to take the X rays now. Don't you have something else to do, Dan?"

The paramedic saluted. "I'll go talk to your friend, Mr. Hamilton. He seemed pretty upset. And a guy from the film crew is still hanging around, too."

"Damn. Please tell them both to go back, okay? Pat will miss his chance to be on the silver screen."

"Cliff, that's enough blabbering," Sarah said firmly, preparing for the left lateral shot.

"Yes, ma'am."

He closed his eyes, and he looked so vulnerable that Sarah had to swallow a pang of tenderness. A movie extra—how like the boy she used to know and how different from the conservative real-estate executive he'd become. As Sarah straightened Cliff's head on the gurney, her hands cradled his beard-stubbed cheeks. Had she ever touched him? Her thumb grazed the soft corner of his mouth. At fifteen she hadn't possessed the experience to imagine kissing Cliff Hamilton.

Sarah had never used her job as an excuse to touch a patient. But this time she allowed the pad of her thumb to move, as if by accident, across Cliff's lower lip.

He opened his eyes. "I'm glad you're here, Sarah."

"So am I." And then she remembered her professional position, and the heat rose in her cheeks. "I mean, this is my job. I'm supposed to be here."

"I know. But I'm just . . . glad." He closed his eyes again. "Surprised, though. Isn't some of the work a little gory?"

"Occasionally." She smiled.

"You don't seem like the type to..."

"Well, I am." What did he know about her type? Ten years ago he had been too involved with Julie DeWeese to notice her, except for her skill at presidential trivia.

"You let your hair grow."

"Yes. Be quiet now." She checked her positioning, then stepped to a cupboard and took out a heavy lead apron. Carefully she placed it over the lower half of Cliff's body.

His eyes flew open. "What's that?"

"A lead apron."

"It's only on half of me."

"That's the half we want to protect." An image of Cliff making love to Julie stuck in her mind.

"We do?" Realization dawned and he smiled weakly. "Oh. Looking out for future generations of Hamiltons?"

"Doing my job," Sarah said evenly. Damn. First she envisioned Cliff Hamilton's kiss, and now . . .

"Do you have kids, Sarah?"

"Nope."

"Married?"

"No." Her heart fluttered. "How was Harvard?"

"Fine. How did you know I went there?"

"Your mother. We ran into each other once when she was organizing a fund-raiser for the hospital."

"Yeah, she used to do a lot of those."

"Luckily for TMC. Okay, we've got to stop talking. Is the pain really bad?" The misery in his voice reached out to her.

"It doesn't tickle."

"I'm sorry," she said helplessly. "Let's get this procedure out of the way so they can get you stitched up."

"Right."

An almost intimate silence filled the room as Sarah snapped the X rays. Her fantasies wouldn't go away. As a boy Cliff had inspired her to scribble countless pages of love notes in her diary. The years had changed them both, and now he prompted cravings that made her blush. But what difference did it make? The outcome would be the same. She and Cliff lived in different worlds.

"One more shot and we're done." She clicked the button again. "That should do it. The X rays will be ready in a few minutes, and we'll know whether you're going to be admitted or not."

"I don't intend to be admitted." He tried to rise.

"Lie flat, please." She pushed him down firmly, feeling the muscles of his chest move under her palm. "That uniform's authentic, isn't it?" she asked.

"That's what Pat tells me. I borrowed it from him." He groaned softly and settled back. "Only a history nut would notice. Why aren't you teaching in some stuffy classroom by now?"

"Why aren't you, instead of selling people's houses?"

"Believe me, I wish I could be. But things have changed, Sarah. Dad has Alzheimer's. I'm needed to run the business."

"Cliff, how terrible! I didn't know that."

"Not many people do, so don't tell anyone. Mom's trying to keep it quiet. I guess she doesn't want anybody feeling sorry for him."

Sarah nodded. "Alzheimer's. That's rough."

"Yeah." They shared a moment of silence, as if to mourn not only the loss of Cliff's father but childhood dreams that now seemed like hopeless fantasies.

"I have to develop the film," Sarah said abruptly. Wrenching free of his steady gaze, she sped to the shelter of the darkroom. When the process was complete, she held the finished pieces of celluloid up to the light.

"They look clean," she whispered to herself. Hurrying from the darkroom, she jammed the X rays into the clips above the viewer. She scanned the pictures again, then sighed with relief. Cliff was okay, though she wasn't qualified to tell him that.

A COLD, wet sponge pressed against the side of Cliff's head, and he jerked in reaction. "Sarah?"

"No. I'm Nurse Johnson," a female voice twanged. "I'm cleaning you up and shaving some of that hair so we can suture you."

"Where's Sarah?" He sounded like a little kid, but he couldn't help it.

Nurse Johnson didn't have Sarah's touch.

"She should be back any minute with the X rays. In the meantime, let's take your temperature." Without preamble she shoved a thermometer in his mouth.

Soon he felt the scraping of a razor against his tortured scalp. Where in the hell was Sarah? Without her around anything might happen to him.

"Here's the developed film, Dr. Edwards."

Cliff's eyelids flew open at the sound of Sarah's voice. He watched her clip three X rays of his skull to the wall contraption. Edwards adjusted his glasses and peered at them. Sarah glanced at Cliff and smiled.

"Well, young man, you're very lucky," Dr. Edwards told him. "No fracture, no concussion. Looks like a nasty cut on the scalp is all, but someone should keep an eye on you through the day and tonight. We have to watch for signs of subdural hematoma."

"What?"

"Blood clots, Cliff," Sarah said, coming to his side.

"Can I ride a horse?"

"I wouldn't advise it. Besides, I don't think you're going to feel like charging across the fields after Confederates, or whatever you're doing over there."

"I think the film is more of a Western," Sarah commented.

Dr. Edwards turned to her. "Whatever it is, I get tired of all this idol worship every time Martin Laramour comes here to shoot another movie." He snorted. "If we're not careful,

Tucson will become another Hollywood."

"But don't you think he's a good director?" Sarah persisted. "His films are historically accurate, but they're also exciting, the way history should be—"

Dr. Edwards gave Sarah a patronizing smile. "Sounds like you ought to be one of Laramour's extras, too."

"Perhaps," Sarah replied without blinking.

Inspiration flashed through Cliff's numbed brain. Of course! "Why don't you come with me to the park for the day, Sarah? You'd love it."

"Uh, Cliff, I..." She hesitated. How many times had Dr. Edwards lectured her about making dates with emergency room patients?

Judging from Sarah's hesitation and the two grooves between Edwards's eyebrows, Cliff sensed he'd broached a touchy subject. "Let me explain, Dr. Edwards. Sarah and I have known each other since high school. In fact, we were in the history club together."

"Oh. I see." His tone could have frozen a Florida swamp.

"I don't think I can make it today, Cliff. But thanks for asking."

Silently Cliff cursed his impetuosity as Edwards handed the X rays to Sarah. "If you'll file these, we'll get this gentleman sewn up and on his way."

"I'll tell Nurse Johnson you're ready to suture, Dr. Edwards," she said, not looking at Cliff.

Sarah filed the X rays and glanced at the clock. Fifteen minutes more of her shift and she had the weekend to herself. Another wild two days with her

goldfish, Mabel and Manfred. Too bad she couldn't have gone to Fort Lowell with Cliff. But he'd picked the wrong time to ask her. She couldn't afford to alienate Edwards or jeopardize her job.

Besides, any involvement with Cliff Hamilton was a no-future situation. What would a Harvard graduate and full partner in his father's real-estate firm have in common with an X-ray technician who barely paid her bills each month?

An orderly pushed a wheelchair into the emergency room, and Sarah paused in her record-keeping chores to see if Cliff had opted for it. Probably not. Hadn't she once seen him limp off the football field, then charge back on two plays later? Sure enough, he came staggering out, looking pale but determined.

Dr. Edwards followed, looking exasperated. "Your friend said he'd come back in an hour or so, Hamilton. Why don't you sit in the waiting room until then?"

"No. I'll be fine. Just fine." He swayed slightly.

"Well, I can't recommend this plan of yours to walk back to the park alone. You should be driven home."

"I'm not going home." He managed a wry smile. "A slight injury like this won't stop a Laramour groupie."

Sarah moved forward, suddenly afraid for Cliff's safety. "You really can't walk over there by yourself; you know."

Cliff hesitated, then glanced at the clock. "Isn't your shift nearly over, Sarah?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you could give me a ride to the park." He turned to her and lifted his eyebrows. "I'll sit in the waiting room until you're ready to go."

She could see no graceful way out of this, and concern for Cliff's well-being overrode her nervousness about displeasing Edwards.

"I'll give you a ride on my way home; Cliff. It's in the same direction." She glanced at Edwards, who nodded curtly. "I'll just be a minute," she called over her shoulder as she went to change. Moments later she was back, wearing jeans and a sea green polo shirt.

Cliff didn't look good. He was slumped in the chair, his eyes closed, skin nearly as white as the square of gauze on the side of his head.

Then his eyes opened, and he smiled. "Hi."

"Hi, yourself. Do you feel up to leaving?"

"I think so." As he sat up straighter, he said, "You're not nearly as scrawny as you used to be, Sarah."

"Thanks, I think." She smiled.

"You're welcome." Cliff closed his eyes as a wave of pain took him by surprise.

"I think I should take you home, Cliff." She paused. "Is there someone who could care for you there?"

"Afraid not. I live alone."

"Oh." She reprimanded herself for enjoying that news. "Well, I'm worried that the filming may be too much for you today."

"Not if you stay with me." He rose unsteadily. "How would you like to spend the day together? Just like old times, Sarah."

She thought about it for only a second. "I'd love to."

They walked together through the automatic doors, and the cool spring air brushed Sarah's skin. She lifted her face to welcome the sunshine after eight hours under fluorescent lights.

Cliff took a deep breath. "Sure smells good out here compared to the antiseptic. I think that was part of what made me dizzy."

"Maybe. But a hundred and twenty years ago, without that modern care, you would have been in trouble."

"True. I wouldn't want to go back in time, but pretending for the weekend is fun. Pat, my friend from Phoenix who got me into this movie thing, spends most of his weekends reenacting Civil War stuff with other members of his historical club, F Troop. I can't decide if he's dedicated or nuts."

"Sounds like fun to me."

"To me, too," Cliff admitted. "But I can't spare that many weekends to play around."

"Cliff...this situation with your father...it really changed things, didn't it?"

"Sure did. But he can't help it, poor guy. Which car is yours?"

She pointed to a red Volkswagen. "Over there."

AS THEY neared the park, a single rider in a navy blue coat like Cliff's mounted his horse and cantered up the wide lane of the cottonwoods while ahead of him a truck fitted with camera equipment filmed his ride. A man with a mop of gray hair stood behind the cameraman, and Sarah wondered if he could be Laramour.

Fort Lowell Park had been altered to resemble the army post it had once been. Across a large field, near the ruins of the original fort, Sarah could see trailers and more camera equipment. Small groups of soldiers and a cluster of women in long dresses talked idly, awaiting their turn before the lens.

"The filming's begun," Cliff said as Sarah parked. He glanced at a gold chain dangling from a small pocket below the waistband of her jeans. "Wouldn't happen to have the time, would you?"

Without thinking, Sarah pulled out her great-grandfather's pocket watch. "Seven-thirty."

Cliff smiled. "Boy, does that watch bring back memories."

"You remember?"

"You bet. It caused our only big fight. You brought it to show everyone in the history club, and I offered to buy it."

"I'm sure I was very rude."

"No. I was rude to place monetary value on an heirloom."

"The watch means a lot to me," Sarah admitted. "My parents gave it to me for high school graduation. For a while I kept it in a bell jar in my apartment, but last year I started carrying it whenever I was wearing jeans with the right kind of pocket."

"Good for you." Admiration shone in his blue eyes, and she grew increasingly warm in the glow of emotion. Cliff leaned forward slightly, and Sarah had the distinct impression he might kiss her.

Abruptly she snapped the case shut and got out.

She reached the passenger's side of the car before he finished extricating his long legs, and she stretched out both hands. "Let me help you, Cliff," she said. "If you stand up too fast, you're liable to crumple."

He rested his palms on hers. As she took both of his hands, her tingling senses recorded everything. "On the count of three, you stand up, and I'll help support you. One, two, three."

Slowly he stood, then swayed gently forward. "Sarah, I think I—" he mumbled as she slipped her hands under his armpits to stop him from falling. He slumped against her, and his arms folded around her waist.

She stiffened in concern. "Damn, I was afraid of this. Are you sure I shouldn't take you home?" She struggled to hold him upright as his broad chest crushed her breasts. But, oh, the excitement of holding him close!

"No, no. Just give me a minute," Cliff muttered, his cheek resting on top of her hair as the spinning sensation subsided.

As warm desire flowed through her, Sarah realized she had to break the intimate contact. "Do you think you can stand alone yet?" she pleaded. "My arms are about ready to give out."

"Let me see." Slowly he straightened. "That's better," he said, taking a deep breath. He looked into her soft brown eyes. "I won't pretend that didn't feel mighty nice, Sarah. You're so soft and— Damn, here comes Pat."

Just as well. Sarah tried to control her trembling.

"Hey, Cliff!" called a man with a full black beard. "I just realized it was you."

"Sarah drove me back. Pat Murphey, I'd like you to meet Sarah Melton, most recently my X-ray technician for this head thing, but ten years ago a high school friend."

"You work at TMC?" Pat grasped her hand.

"Good luck for me, I can tell you," Cliff said.

Pat threw an arm around Cliff's shoulders. "How's the head?"

"Surface wound, apparently."

"Great. Still up to playing soldier for Laramour?"

Cliff glanced at Sarah. "On a limited basis. I brought along my nurse. I also expected Laramour would take one look at her gorgeous red hair and rope her into the filming, too."

Pat laughed. "Care to join us, Sarah? Might as well get paid while you're helping Cliff. It isn't a lot, but some spare change never hurts."

"You're right. I don't have anything to wear, though. Does Laramour have costumes, Pat?"

"Probably, but my wife can loan you something. Why not go into the casting office already decked out? They'll love it. I'll find Maureen and ask about the dresses." Pat left in search of his wife, leaving Sarah and Cliff alone again.

"You know, you intrigue the hell out of me, Sarah Jane."

"I do?"

"Uh-huh." He touched her cheek with his knuckles.

"Oh." Sarah looked into his blue eyes and absorbed his caress with every nerve in her body. She knew that, if he tried to kiss her now, she wouldn't stop him. He smiled, acknowledging the

lowering of a barrier, and then someone spoke beside them.

"Sarah? I'm Maureen."

Sarah glanced around and met green eyes fringed by startling black lashes. Clouds of dark hair surrounded a milk white complexion. "I'm glad to meet you," she said, taking the other woman's outstretched hand. "Pat said you might be able to—"

"No problem. When Laramour called Pat and asked if F Troop would like to be part of the film, I packed every dress I had! Come on over to the camper."

"Okay. I'll—I'll see you later, Cliff."

His blue gaze held her brown one for a split second. "You bet," he said. "And, Sarah?"

She paused in the act of turning away. "Yes?"

"I wish you'd take your hair out of the braid."

"Uh, we'll see." Not daring to look at him again, Sarah walked beside Maureen to the camper.

"Pat says you knew Cliff in high school." Maureen shook the folds from a chocolate brown dress with white lace trim. She laid the dress on a small bed and reached for a pale green gown with tiny blue flowers sprinkled across it.

"I was a sophomore when he was a senior. These dresses are beautiful, Maureen. Where did you find something so perfect?"

"I sew. I also made Pat's uniform and some of the other men's clothes, too."

"Sounds like a lot of work for a hobby."

Maureen laughed. "Don't let Pat hear you call it a hobby. He takes F Troop very seriously. I sometimes wonder if the real frontier soldiers worked as hard as these guys do. But if you love history the way we do, it beats playing cards on weekends."

"I'm sure it does." Sarah stroked the soft cotton of the green dress. "I once planned to teach history."

"Did you? What made you change your mind?"

"I didn't really change it, I just...got into something else," Sarah finished lamely. "But I'm looking forward to a whole day with a bunch of history buffs."

"I think you'll have fun. Cliff's a terrific guy. We hoped this weekend might take his mind off his problems. And if I believed in fate, I'd think the accident was planned so he could meet you again."

"We were just buddies in high school, Maureen. We aren't long-lost sweethearts or anything."

"Could've fooled me."

Sarah realized Maureen was referring to the scene she'd interrupted a moment ago. "May I try these on?" she said to fill the awkward silence.

"Of course. I'll step outside."

Quickly Sarah stripped to her bra and panties and reached for the green-and-blue dress because it buttoned up the front. Except for a little tightness in the bust, the dress fit perfectly. Then she spied her feet and started to giggle. The jogging shoes would have to go.

She started to open the door to find Maureen, then paused to flip her braid over her shoulder and unwind the

rubber band that held it. She rummaged in her purse for a small brush, and stroked vigorously. Moments later her hair was falling halfway down her back in rippling waves.

SEVERAL YARDS away a pair of blue eyes watched the closed camper door. Slowly Cliff sipped his coffee and tried to listen as Pat and Martin Laramour discussed the strategy for the remainder of the day's filming. He registered their conversation, but his attention was trained on that door. Asking her to take her hair down had been an afterthought, but he was glad he had. He longed to slide his fingers through the copper waves. In fact, every inch of her body beckoned him with an intensity that amazed him. He grew weak from imagining his hands stroking the fullness of her breasts, the silken length of her thighs, the— He shut his eyes against the sensations building inside him. And she was afraid of him, apparently because of his money and social position.

"And you might be able to help load the wounded on the wagon after the battle, Cliff," Pat said. "Cliff? Are you listening?"

"What?"

The men sitting around the fire laughed. "I think Cliff's mind is on other matters," teased a tall man with wire-rimmed glasses.

"Think you'll be able to keep your mind on the filming, Hamilton?" Laramour asked. "Pretend love is great on the screen, but real love can louse up the schedule."

Cliff opened his mouth to protest. Love? He might be a little preoccupied, but...

"Leave him alone," Pat said. "I remember feeling that way about Maureen at the beginning, although you turkeys may never have been lucky enough to find someone who inspired that dazed expression."

At that moment the camper door swung open, and Cliff's jaw dropped. Sarah raised the hem of her skirt to reveal slim ankles and bare feet as she climbed down the camper steps.

"What's the matter? Haven't you ever seen a woman in a dress, Hamilton?" Pat joked.

"Not looking like that," Cliff answered.

"I can see what you mean," commented the man with glasses. "That dress fits real good in the top."

"Keep your comments to yourself, Bill. Excuse me, gentlemen." Cliff headed for the camper.

Sarah made her way over to the picnic table where Maureen was measuring flour into a bowl. She pretended not to notice Cliff.

"What do you think?" she asked Maureen.

"Wow? You fill out that dress much better than I do, Sarah. I may not have the nerve to wear it again. Wouldn't care to buy it, would you?"

"Well, I..." Sarah hesitated, remembering her meager salary. And she'd never wear the dress again.

"Let me buy it for you, Sarah."

Sarah looked at Cliff, and her heart leapt at the tenderness in his face. "Cliff, I really couldn't accept—"

"I wish you would. The dress is perfect for you."

"But you don't pay for a dress you'll wear once. That's wasteful, no matter how much money you have."

"You're talking nonsense."

"Only from your point of view, Cliff." She glanced regretfully into his blue eyes. "You see, we're disagreeing already. Maybe I'd better go home."

"Excuse us a minute, Maureen." Cliff cupped Sarah's elbow and guided her out of earshot of Maureen and the cavalry group.

"So this is about money."

"Not only money. Social position and education, and all the life experiences that separate us. It's best if I go home, and we'll forget we ran into each other."

He ran gentle fingers along the side of her neck. "I'm afraid I can't do that." His eyes were the warmest blue she'd ever seen. "I think we can solve our problems, Sarah. Give it time."

She drew a quivering breath as the feather touch of his fingers played havoc with her logic. "But, Cliff, when one person is rich, and the other is... not, that one feels... at a disadvantage."

He studied her. "Okay. I'll accept that. Why did you decide to spend the day with me, then?"

"It sounded like fun. Besides, after you mentioned your father's illness, I believed I could help somehow."

"I haven't told many people about Dad. But I told you. Just like I used to cry on your shoulder in high school."

"Sarah, the official wailing wall."

He grimaced. "Sounds like I used you, doesn't it? And maybe I did. But

I'm not a kid anymore, Sarah. I've learned to give as well as take."

"As in dresses?"

"You know that's not what I mean."

"I know. But I really can't accept the dress, Cliff."

"Okay. Too bad, though." He drew a lock of her hair across her shoulder to nestle at the neckline of her dress. "There. You look just like an officer's wife in one of the old Fort Lowell photographs. Seems a shame you'll never wear that dress again."

The whisper of his fingers wiped out the last of her determination, and she wished for something, or someone, to lean against.

"You know," he continued in the same low, coaxing tone, "you could turn a man's head, Sarah."

His gaze drifted to her mouth, and she knew he would kiss her, and all would be lost.

She watched, hypnotized, as he bent toward her. "Cliff, this is a mis—"

Ignoring her words, he began a leisurely exploration of her lips. With gentle pressure on her chin, he urged her mouth open, muffling her protest. As his tongue dipped into her mouth, she could feel his heartbeat quicken. The pace of her heart matched his, and she fought to keep from wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him closer.

Gathering what little strength remained, she braced both hands against his chest and pushed herself free. His head jerked with the force of her shove and her eyes widened in horror when he staggered backward, holding his head in both hands.

"Cliff!" She rushed to him. "I'm sorry! Are you okay?" She peered into his pale face. "I forgot. I shouldn't have—"

"No, you sure as hell shouldn't." He managed a weak grin while something akin to the *1812 Overture* played loudly in his head.

"One look at you in that dress, with your hair down, and I was ready to kneel at your feet, Sarah."

"Thanks to me, you almost fell at my feet," she said.

"I'll be okay. I guess we're even now." He cupped her face in his hands. "I shouldn't have rushed you. Come on, let's go back to the others."

He took her hand in a loose, companionable grip, and tears misted Sarah's eyes. Damn it, he really was a terrific guy who didn't deserve such shabby treatment.

But his sudden appearance in her life had thrown her into total confusion. She was giving off contradictory signals, and the poor man didn't know which response she wanted. Trouble was, neither did she.

*

"COME ON OVER here," Maureen called. "We're not in this scene so you may as well join us for breakfast."

As Sarah hobbled toward the table, rocks and goathead stickers bit into her bare feet. Funny, she hadn't noticed them when she'd walked with Cliff.

"I didn't think about shoes." Maureen handed her a cup of coffee. "I'll be glad to loan you some, if you can wear a size seven."

"I can probably squeeze into them." Sarah sipped the hot liquid, glad to

have something to do besides thinking of Cliff. "Maureen, I—I convinced Cliff not to buy the dress for me, after all."

"Oh. Well, that's fine." The flicker of hurt in Maureen's green eyes was quickly countered by a brilliant smile. "By the way, did you want to borrow the brown dress, too? It would look terrific with your coloring. And I won't make a pitch to sell it to you, either."

"Maureen, I don't want you to think I wouldn't love to own these dresses, but—"

"I think I'm beginning to understand," she said gently. "His money, his willingness to spend it so freely on you, makes you uncomfortable, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Sarah admitted.

"He only wants to show he cares for you."

"Perhaps, but I—"

"Never mind. Just borrow the brown dress. I have a feeling you and Cliff will work this out." Maureen stood. "I'll get the other dress."

Sarah finished her meal and took her dishes to the hot kettle of dishwater. Cliff was nowhere in sight. She had cleaned the dishes when she heard his strong baritone.

"Thanks, Maureen," he called. "We'll put all this in the tent."

Turning, she saw Cliff approaching with a pair of high-topped shoes in his hand and the brown dress folded over his arm. Sarah guessed that Maureen had given him the clothing on purpose.

"I wasn't sure where to put these dishes," she said.

"If you'll take mine—" he nodded toward his own "—we'll stow everything away."

Wordlessly Sarah followed his directions and walked with him to his tent.

"Just duck under the flap," Cliff directed. "Have a seat." He gestured toward a canvas camp stool, then set the shoes down. "Maureen thinks these will fit." He bent over, then suddenly paled, and with a moan he lowered himself to the tent floor.

Sarah dropped to her knees beside him. "Is it your head?"

"Yeah." He closed his eyes.

"Why don't you lie down?" She helped ease him down on the blanket.

"Sarah, thanks for being here," he said with a sigh. "I feel like such a weakling right now, although earlier my head didn't hurt much at all."

"I guess it depends on how you move. Remember when you got out of the car and almost fainted?"

"Uh-huh. You were there then, too." He licked his dry lips. "Would you please pour me a drink of water from my canteen? It's a little stuffy in here."

She found the canteen and supported his head and shoulders with one arm, his solid weight cradled against her, his lips moist and open as he drank. When Sarah lowered the canteen, Cliff's gaze met hers, and she gulped.

"If you're too warm, perhaps you'd like to take off your jacket." Damn, that was the worst comment she could have made!

"Good idea." He began unfastening the buttons.

"And I'll open the tent flap so you can get some more air," she babbled, starting to rise.

"Sarah." He grasped her wrist. "Don't be afraid of me. After all, I am an injured man."

She didn't feel at all reassured. "I may know that, but I'm not sure you do. Believe me, it would not be good for you to participate in fun and games right now, Cliff. And—and I'm going to see to it that you don't."

He chuckled. "Are you?"

"Yes."

Gently he brought her palm to his lips and placed a kiss there. "Okay, Sarah. If you say so. But my head hurts, and your cool hand on my forehead feels so great. How about helping me out of this coat and stroking my head for a little while? If you insist, we'll open the tent flaps." He released her hand.

"All right." She moved on hands and knees to the front of the tent and secured the flaps. A cool breeze slipped through the opening, and she sighed, releasing some of the tension curling inside her.

Crawling back to his side, she helped him with the jacket. His shirt clung damply to his chest. "Let's take the shirt off, too," she said bravely.

"Okay." Cliff shut his eyes and savored the sensation of having her undress him.

"Thanks, Sarah." He settled back on the blanket and looked at her. She avoided his gaze so he closed his eyes again. "Now if you'd stroke my head for a little while..."

Sarah willed her long fingers to stop their shaking each time she placed

her hand on Cliff's forehead. She smoothed back his wavy brown hair and concentrated on controlling her runaway breathing. She kept her other hand clenched in her lap to keep from caressing his muscled shoulders and arms, his broad chest, the taut skin across his rib cage.

"Sarah?"

"Yes?"

"Got one for you. Who ran against Woodrow Wilson?"

She smiled. "Charles Hughes."

He sighed with satisfaction. "I've missed you, Sarah. Nobody else I know could have answered that."

They were silent for several minutes, and then he spoke again in a dreamy voice.

"You know what we're acting like?"

"No, what?"

"Like two people..." His voice trailed off. "Two people falling in...love." His muscles relaxed, and he slept.

Cliff was right, at least in her case. As for him, he was probably confusing love with need.

So what now? Spend the day with the man she loved, who imagined himself falling in love with her? She could do worse than fulfill her fantasy for one day.

She sat on the camp stool to put on Maureen's high-topped shoes. While Cliff slept, she'd find out if the movie company would hire another extra. Once outside she ran into Pat and asked whom to contact.

"Someone should be in that trailer over there. I'll walk you over. How's Cliff?"

"Sleeping. He's not as invincible as he lets on."

"No kidding. About four years ago he wandered over to our encampment looking like a lost puppy. He'd just been called home from graduate school to help his dad in the business, and he was miserable."

"What a mess. Cliff had such dreams."

"Yeah. He doesn't talk about them much anymore, but he and I got drunk one night, and I found out how important the study of history is to him. He's a scholar, not a businessman. Well, here you are. Tell them I sent you."

"I will. Thanks, Pat."

"No problem. And if Cliff's awake in a half hour or so, Laramour's shooting a cavalry march. Cliff might like to ride in it. I don't think it would bother his head." Pat tipped his hat and started back across the field.

Within minutes Sarah was signed with the company for the day's shooting. When the men rode out of camp in the next scene, she would be among the women bidding them goodbye. It would be fun. Her step quickened as she returned to Cliff's tent.

He was sitting up, his shirt buttoned but hanging outside his trousers. Seeing her, he looked up. "Where've you been?"

"Getting hired as an extra. I'm in the next scene and so are you, if you feel up to it." She gathered her skirts under her and sat down across from him.

"I'll be ready. That little catnap really helped."

"Good." Sarah wondered if he remembered his last remark before he'd fallen asleep. Just as well if he didn't.

"PLACES, LADIES," came the hollow command from the bullhorn. "The column will ride past you, and you can wave, blow kisses, whatever seems appropriate. You're proud of these guys, and you want to give them a fond farewell before they go off to battle."

Sarah took her place with the others. She could feel the excitement in the air when the cameras and klieg lights snapped on. Sabers clanked, saddles creaked and horses snorted as the men filed solemnly past the group of women, who waved and called out their farewells.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Cliff's big bay coming toward her, and she tilted her head back and shielded her eyes from the sun. Cliff looked magnificent. He was so vibrant, so alive, so real, that suddenly she couldn't imagine her life without him in it.

He flashed her a breathtaking smile. Then, without warning, he swept down and pulled her up to him for a resounding kiss. "No more goodbyes, Sarah," he said, putting her gently back on her feet.

She stood rooted to the spot as the cameras dollied in for a close-up of her expression, fingers pressed against her mouth as if to suppress a cry of longing.

"Cut!"

The command brought Sarah out of her stupor.

"That was terrific, young lady."

Sarah turned to find a familiar-looking man with a mop of gray hair beside her. "Mr. Laramour?"

"At your service."

"I'm glad to meet you," she managed, holding out her hand. "I've seen all the Westerns you've directed, and I feel very honored to be involved in this one."

"You're great for my self-confidence," he said. "What's your name?"

"Sarah Melton."

"Ever think of taking up acting, Sarah? I love what you did with that goodbye scene."

"That wasn't acting. That was..." Sarah paused.

"Sweetheart, if that wasn't acting, I hope he feels the same way about you."

THAT EVENING, Maureen chatted steadily throughout the dinner preparations, as the film crew packed up its equipment and left for hotel rooms and restaurant meals, abandoning the park to F Troop for the night.

"It's been fun, but I'm kind of glad they're gone," Maureen confessed. "Now you can see what it's like when we have our encampments minus all the Hollywood touches."

"How often do you do this camping out, 1860s style?" Sarah asked.

"At least three or four times a year with all of us. The men go out more often, but I'd rather not deal with the snow in the mountains so I'm glad to stay home those weekends."

Cliff shook his head. "The entire idea fascinates me."

"You and Sarah could join, Cliff. I know you're busy, but you need to relax sometime."

"I'll give it serious thought. And I'm sure Sarah would get a kick out of it."

"Cliff, I don't think that I—"

"Don't be hasty, Sarah Jane," Cliff said, tousling her hair. "Looks like we're almost ready to eat, so I'll get a blanket for us to sit on."

As the desert chill crept in from the riverbed, Sarah was glad of the warmth of the cheerful blaze. She noticed that Cliff ate well, which meant his head wound wasn't causing stomach problems. The beef-and-rice stew was amazingly tasty, and Sarah consumed her share.

"Coffee or beer?" Pat asked.

"Coffee," Sarah said automatically.

"Have a little beer, Sarah," Cliff urged. "Pat orders a special keg for the encampments. It's great."

Sarah stuck out her tin cup. She might as well play this pioneer life to the hilt.

"I'll have a little beer, too, Pat," Cliff said, holding out his cup. "That is, if my nurse thinks I can."

"A small cup won't hurt, I guess. You seem to be fine."

Cliff's reference to Sarah's nursing duties reminded her that the day was officially over. Soon she must leave. But the fire was warm, and the beer was very good.

"Here's to us," Cliff whispered, raising his mug.

"Here's to your health," Sarah whispered back. She was very aware of

Cliff's body next to hers on the blanket. She drained her mug.

"You're flushed," Cliff said softly, stroking her cheek. "Too much beer or too much heat from the fire or—could my prim and proper longtime friend be thinking the same thing I am?"

"I doubt it," she lied, gazing into the flames. Her eyelids drooped. From across the circle came the strumming of a guitar, and a sweet lassitude settled over her.

"Come here, Sarah." Gently Cliff slid his arm around her waist, and she leaned gratefully against him.

"Poor Sarah," he crooned against her forehead. "I didn't stop to think that you'd been up all night when we left the hospital. You must be exhausted."

"No, no," she protested sleepily. "I'll rest for a little while and have some coffee. Don't let me go to sleep," she mumbled.

He murmured something noncommittal and pulled her closer, relishing the feel of her in his arms.

"You've grown into quite a woman, Marvelous Melton," he said into her smoke-scented hair.

"Mmm." She stirred drowsily, and he bent to press his lips against her cheek.

"I don't think you'll be able to kiss your sleepyhead awake, Cliff," Pat said. "She looks like she's out for the duration. Why not let her lie down in your tent and come back and join us for a while?"

"Good idea, Pat. But I think I'll turn in, too."

Pat held his friend's steady gaze. "Okay."

"Don't worry. I won't take advantage of a groggy woman."

"She's a sweet girl."

"Yes, Pat. I'll remember that."

Carefully he shook Sarah almost awake, then drew her gently up to lean against him.

Maureen tucked a soft bundle under his arm. "Give her this to put on so she won't wrinkle her dress."

"Thanks, Maureen," he whispered.

"Thanks, Maureen," Sarah murmured dreamily. "One beer doesn't usually do this to me," she added.

Cliff pulled her closer. "It's not the beer, Sarah. You're tired. You need to sleep."

"Can't sleep. Got to keep an eye on you," she said. She stumbled once, then stooped obligingly as he helped her into the tent.

HOURS LATER, Sarah stirred uncomfortably. Beer always did this to her, and now she'd have to leave this warm bed and stumble to— She sat up abruptly. Good God, she was in Cliff's tent. A vague memory returned—of Cliff helping her walk, a chill when he changed her clothes. Changed her clothes!

She touched the sleeve of her nightgown. Probably from Maureen's cache. Sarah's cheeks burned at the thought of everyone knowing she was sleeping in Cliff's tent. She glanced around. The inside of the tent was very dark, Cliff a lumpy shadow on the other side.

She sighed in resignation. First things first. Wrapping the warm blanket around her, she scuttled barefoot into the cold night to the park rest

rooms. By the time she slipped back into the tent, her teeth were chattering.

What time was it? Should she leave now before anyone woke up? She found her pocket watch and held it close to her face. Looked like four-thirty.

"Sarah?"

Damn. "What?"

"Are you all right?"

"I'm f-fine. Go b-back to sleep, Cliff."

"You sound cold." He captured her wrist. "Your arm is freezing. Come here, and I'll warm you up."

"That's okay. I'll go back to my own bed."

"Sarah, stop playing games with me."

"I'm not, Cliff. Go back to sleep. You need your rest."

"I need something else a lot more, Marvelous Melton."

Sarah couldn't pretend ignorance of his meaning. But making love to this man would be far too dangerous.

"Cliff, no. Your head."

"My head feels fine."

She stalled. "How long have you been awake?"

"Since you have." He stroked the inside of her wrist with his thumb.

"Sarah, I want you," he said softly.

"I don't think it's wise."

"Are you always wise, Sarah Jane?"

She smiled tremulously. "Of course. I'm the eldest child, wise beyond her years."

Propping himself on one arm, he moved his other hand up to the nape of her neck. The tendrils of her hair flowed through his spread fingers as he

urged her closer. He could feel the warmth of her breath on his face.

"Sometimes," he murmured, "it's wise to be foolish."

Sarah was powerless to stop the kiss, even knowing what must inevitably follow. In unhurried fashion, Cliff closed the gap until their breath mingled.

His mastery of her mouth left no doubt as to how he expected this interlude to end, and as she opened to his questing tongue, she realized there could be no turning back. When his hand moved from her neck to circle her waist and pull her down next to him, she didn't resist.

He fit her tightly against him, groaning softly at the ripe promise of her so close. He unfastened the button at the high neck of her gown. "Lift your arms," he whispered.

Reaching for the nightgown's hem, he skimmed the garment over her head. Then he unbuttoned his shirt and gathered her into his arms, pressing the fullness of her soft breasts against his hair-roughened chest. "God, you feel fantastic," he said with a sigh.

She arched against him, molding her hips to the pulsing desire covered by his cotton briefs. The darkness surrounded them in a cave of intimacy, urging Sarah to surrender herself to this delirious passion.

Cliff's mouth left hers and found the hard bud of one nipple. The tug of his teeth and lips made her writhe against him, and her breathing grew ragged.

"Love me," she begged, almost afraid the moment would slip away. She tugged at his briefs, and he lifted

his hips so she could remove them. "Love me now."

He gasped as her warm fingers encircled him. "Not yet, Sarah," he said. "I want to see you. I'm going to light the lamp."

"No," she murmured, suddenly aware of where they were. "Light casts shadows."

"The others are asleep. I want to watch your face while I love you." His lips lingered against hers, then were gone.

He lifted the lantern's chimney and ignited the wick. Light leapt into every corner of the tent, and Sarah instinctively turned away from the sudden brightness and the uncompromising view of his desire for her. The glare softened as he turned down the wick.

"Don't be shy, Sarah." Cliff pulled her slowly over to face him. "Am I so difficult to look at?"

She winced at the vulnerability in his voice. "Of course not. You're . . . I'm just not used to this, I guess. You were my high school idol, and now . . ."

"Now I'm just a man who wants you very much." He looked deep into her eyes. "I hope you want me, too."

Her heart raced in response to the heat of his gaze. She had to have him. "Yes, I want you."

"You're so beautiful, Sarah." His hand followed the curve of her neck to the slope of one breast, and he teased the tip to rigidity with his thumb. Watching the play of emotions on her face, he moved to caress her other breast. "That's what I wanted. To see that look in your eyes. And to enjoy all of you."

His thirsty gaze traveled over her, delighting in the heavy fullness resting in his palm. He bent to kiss the tiny freckle over her heart, the valley between her breasts. When she sucked in her breath, he dipped his tongue into the hollow of her navel.

"Cliff," she moaned.

"So beautiful, Sarah," he murmured.

"I want you," she said breathlessly.

"I want you inside me, Cliff."

She reached for him, and he trembled at her touch. "I know. But I meant to—"

"Love me, Cliff," she whispered, and her fingers closed urgently around him.

With a moan of assent, he moved over her. As he thrust forward, she rose to meet him, giving herself as he hadn't dared expect she would. With a hushed cry he sought the moist, velvet depths of her, and she answered with a gasp of delight at the fusion of their bodies.

"Sarah," he said raggedly as she closed herself around him and he felt wondrously lost in her. "At last, Sarah."

"Yes, Cliff," she crooned. The ageless rhythm of his movements was transforming her, and her heartbeat became a crescendo as Cliff took her further and further into herself.

Ever deeper he plunged, discovering new levels of abandon in her. And when he thought she could open herself no more, she flung back the inner gates to her passionate soul, allowing him to touch the core of her being; she seemed to cascade over him like a shimmering waterfall. With a soft cry

of triumph, he followed her into his own shattering release.

For long moments they lay entwined, not speaking, savoring the gifts they had bestowed upon each other. Then Sarah opened her eyes slowly and stared at the golden light the lamp cast on the tent roof.

"Sarah Jane, you make love with the daring of a sky diver," Cliff said into her ear. "I have never known a woman who threw herself into the experience like that."

"Cliff—" her voice was tinged with awe "—I've never behaved that way before."

He raised himself on one elbow. "You haven't?"

"No, I—" She stopped. "That was dumb to admit, wasn't it?"

"Why?"

"Now you're liable to feel some obligation to me."

"What if I told you I've never experienced anything like that? Would you be obligated to me?"

She stared at him. "This is getting out of hand. I never intended—"

"What did you intend? I don't picture you as a one-night-stand person, Sarah. And I'm sure as hell not."

"No, no, that's not what I wanted, either. But we can't—"

"You regret what just happened."

"I don't know." She looked away from the anxiety on his face. "We're so different, Cliff. This time together has been special, but it's not the real world. Continuing this relationship would be unwise—for both of us."

"Ah. Unwise again. What's the problem? A very large boyfriend? An unspeakable hereditary trait?"

"Much worse than that. It has to do with the kind of people we are—where we've been and where we're going. Please don't plan on anything more than we've shared this weekend."

Almost roughly he brought her back to face him. "Sarah Jane, I'm planning on quite a bit more. I've rediscovered my lost Sarah, and I have ten years of catching up to do."

"It's too late, Cliff."

"Never." He nibbled her lower lip. "I'd say we found each other in the nick of time." He gave her a quick squeeze and released her, then reached out to extinguish the lamp.

Pale sunshine crept under the tent flap. "Obviously we need to have a long talk about this," Cliff continued, "but it's getting light, and I have to feed the horses."

With economy he pulled on his clothes, and she closed her eyes so he wouldn't see her tears.

"And when I get back, we'll discuss this terrible incompatibility you imagine we have."

She murmured something vague and drew the blanket over her shoulders. She had made her decision. After he left, she would dress in her jeans and shirt and leave before he missed her.

She watched him disappear from the tent, and her throat knotted with grief. But she had to go. Better that their memories of each other remained untarnished.

After the smooth drape of Maureen's dresses, the denim felt rough on her bare legs. She tied her athletic shoes with a vengeance but slowed her movements while folding Maureen's beautiful clothes.

After placing them in a neat pile, she located her purse and started for the door. Leaving now seemed so cold, but there was no other way.

"What in the hell are you doing?"

She whirled and bumped into him. "Cliff! I'm sorry. I—"

"You were going to leave. Just like that. Without saying anything to anyone."

"It's better if I go."

"The hell it is."

Her dark eyes pleaded for understanding. "I don't want to spoil what we had with harsh realities, Cliff. Let me have my dream."

"Stay, and I'll make more dreams come true."

"No. I won't take the chance. I'm leaving, Cliff."

"What about the filming? You signed on as an extra, remember?"

"I doubt if I'll be missed much."

"What happened to dependable Sarah?" he said.

"She made a mistake early this morning. Remaining here any longer would be a bigger one."

"Maureen and Pat will be hurt, Sarah."

"I know. Would you tell them how much I appreciate all they did for me?"

He stared at her. "What about the money you earned?"

Her eyes were bleak. "I can't afford to stay and collect it. Goodbye, Cliff." With a sob she pushed through the tent flap and ran out into the pale light of morning.

*
“SOMEBODY NAMED Hamilton was in looking for you a couple of mornings ago, Sarah.”

She glanced up, startled, at the orderly.

“You’d already left so he said he’d try again.”

Sarah swallowed and looked at the clock. A half hour to go. Maybe Cliff wouldn’t try again. But what if he showed up today? The car accident victims she had X-rayed had left the front of her smock spattered with blood. She hadn’t had time to change.

At five minutes to seven, he walked in. His smile faded when she turned away from the filing cabinet.

“My God, Sarah.”

“Hello, Cliff.”

“Your clothes are covered with blood.”

“Bad car accident. How are you?”

“I don’t like to think of you exposed to—”

“The real world?” she snapped.

“That’s not what I meant. But, Sarah, all that blood.”

“Sorry, but that’s how I make my living. I warned you about how reality might affect our relationship.”

“Stop it, Sarah. I’m not some sheltered rich kid. I brought my father in for some tests this morning, and if that’s not reality, I don’t know what is.”

Remorse shadowed her brown eyes.
“I’m sorry, Cliff. Is he worse?”

“I think so. It’s hard for me to tell.”

Sarah laid her hand on his arm. “I’ll be through in five minutes. Can I see

him?” Cliff’s hand covered hers. His warmth felt very good.

“Thanks for offering.” He held her gaze. “I’ve missed you, Sarah.”

“Cliff—”

“Go change. We’ll talk later.”

With a nod Sarah left him in the waiting room.

Later, as they walked down the hallway to his father’s room, Cliff elaborated on his condition. “He’s become more than Mom can handle, but he’s not sick enough to stay in a hospital full-time. We’re looking at an intermediate care facility, although Mom hates to let go.”

“I can understand why she’d cling to him, Cliff, after all their years together. But have you thought of the shock to her if he has to be institutionalized?”

“Shock? I assumed she’d be relieved.”

“Maybe, but she would have a lot of empty hours.”

“I suppose she’ll go back to her charity work, then.”

Sarah started to speak, then thought better of it. She would be out of line to suggest what Cora Hamilton should do with her spare time. And yet how foolish for Cliff to sacrifice himself to a business he disliked when perhaps his mother—

“Here it is. I’ll go in first.” Cliff pushed gently on the half-open door. “Dad, I’ve brought an old high school friend of mine to see you. Sarah Melton.”

Sarah stepped into the room. As her eyes adjusted to the lack of light, she could see the gaunt man lying in the bed, but he bore almost no resem-

blance to the Jack Hamilton she remembered. Hands that had firmly clasped those of business tycoons and politicians now trembled and plucked at the rumpled white sheets.

"I don't recall your name, young man," he said to Cliff. "Are you a doctor?"

Sarah glanced at Cliff and saw him stiffen. "Mr. Hamilton, this is Cliff, your son. The light's not very good in here so you may not have seen him clearly."

"Cliff? Oh, Cliff. Well, well. How's college?"

"Fine, Dad."

The old man looked at Sarah. "You in college, too?"

"No, Mr. Hamilton. I work here at TMC."

"Mmm. Cliff's studying history. Won't make any money at it, though."

"Probably not, Dad."

"Say, would one of you send my secretary in? Time to stop jabbering and get to work."

"I'll get her, Dad." Cliff motioned to Sarah, and they left together. "Good God," he muttered, shaking his head.

"It must be very hard for you and your mother."

Cliff nodded. "Thanks for coming, Sarah. It sure helps not to face that alone." He paused at the nurses' station. "Dad asked for his secretary. I don't know if he needs anything, but maybe someone should check him."

"Will do, Mr. Hamilton," the short woman assured him.

"I'll walk this lady to her car, and I'll be back."

"Cliff, I can—"

"Humor me. I need to be with you a little longer. And besides, I haven't asked what I came to ask."

Sarah glanced at him apprehensively. "What's that?"

"I'm taking the afternoon off tomorrow. How would you like to go on a picnic?"

"Cliff, I'll do anything to help you with your father, but more than that..."

"You're a cruel tease, Sarah Jane. You bewitch me, give me a heady taste of your lovemaking, then turn me away. I'm suffering, lady."

"I'm sorry, but I know what's best."

He took hold of her shoulders.

"Sarah, I beg you to spend tomorrow afternoon with me. I'm a desperate man."

Looking into his eyes was a mistake. She knew it and yet...

"I'll pick you up at noon, and I'll bring the food."

"Noon," she repeated like a robot.

"I'll be ready."

"You'll have to give me your address."

She complied, and he smiled. "It'll be okay, Sarah. We've got a few mountains to convert to molehills."

SARAH DIDN'T look a second time when the aging pickup turned the corner. Shifting her weight on the concrete porch steps in front of her apartment, she bent to retie a shoelace. When the truck door slammed, she glanced up.

"Cliff?"

"Come on, Sarah. It's only been one day. You can't have forgotten what I look like that fast."

She stood up. "Where did you get that truck?"

"It's Dad's." A straw cowboy hat cast speckled shade over his face. "But I've used it for years as a getaway truck. When life seems a little overwhelming, I climb in and drive into the desert somewhere. I've done it ever since I was sixteen."

"Alone?"

"Usually."

"Oh." Sarah thought of all the times she'd done the same sort of thing.

"What's the matter?" He hooked his thumbs in the worn pockets of his jeans. "Stereotype slipping?"

She grinned sheepishly. "Maybe."

He smiled back. "Good. Let's go."

When they reached the street, he opened the passenger's door and boosted her into the cab. His hands were firm and efficient at her waist. He released her immediately and closed the door after her.

His nonchalance as he swung up into the driver's seat made her wonder if that brief body contact had affected him at all. For her part, it had set up a turmoil that even now had her clutching the armrest to keep from cuddling next to him on the wide bench seat.

As he coaxed the aging motor to life and manipulated the floor shift, she realized he *had* driven his truck hundreds of times. The knowledge comforted her, even as the flexed muscles in his forearm when he shifted gears sent a thrill of sexual awareness through her.

"You wore your hair down again. Thanks, Sarah."

"Probably impractical for a picnic."

"Not if your date is crazy about it that way."

Sarah glanced away in confusion. "Have you—did you pick a spot for the picnic?"

"Sort of. Why?"

"I understood what you meant, about escaping once in a while, and I, um, wondered if you'd like to see where I go when life gets overwhelming."

His glance was warm. "I'd love it."

"Then take the Florence Highway toward Catalina."

"You've got it."

Sarah found it difficult not to watch Cliff. In all her fantasies, he'd been an unattainable sophisticate in designer clothes and sleek cars. She'd never imagined him looking like a bronzed cowhand.

"You don't know how close I came to sending you a dozen roses this week."

Now *that* wouldn't have surprised her at all. "But you didn't," she prompted.

"I rehashed our many conversations and realized roses, no, but a picnic, yes."

Her heart thumped faster. He'd obviously spent time analyzing their relationship, and where they could be on common ground. Cliff didn't give up easily. Did she? Why should she assume she couldn't fit into his life? Perhaps she'd been too hasty. Now, thanks to his persistence, she'd have another chance.

"I'm glad you invited me, Cliff."

"Is that why you're hugging the door handle?"

"Uh..."

"You know, Sarah, I've never outgrown the thrill of tooling down the road with a beautiful woman nestled against my hip." He stretched his bronzed arm across the back of the seat. "Red Rover, Red Rover, send Sarah on over."

"Are you sure it won't interfere with your—"

Cliff groaned, rolling his eyes. "Lord, spare me from coy women. Do you, or do you not, want to touch me?"

Sarah blushed and laughed. "I do," she admitted, sliding into the curve of his arm. As her hip and thigh brushed his and his arm tightened around her shoulders, she almost expected to hear a sizzle. Instead, the air filled with a soft sigh, and she honestly didn't know whose it was.

"That's better," Cliff said, squeezing her arm gently.

"Mmm-hmm." Sarah couldn't have elaborated if her life had depended on it.

"Okay, we're officially on the Florence Highway," Cliff told her after a while. "How far are we going?"

"Just a few more miles. There's a dirt road to the right."

"Most of that's private property, as I recall."

"My parents own some land there, an inheritance from my great-grandfather. Those were his only two legacies. A watch and a ten-acre homestead."

"Anything on it?"

"Not anymore. My folks always dreamed of building a house, but they could never afford it. And now..."

"Now what?" he prodded gently.

"Dad's been a miner all his life, but he's decided to retrain for a career in computers. They're selling some of the land to pay for his schooling."

Cliff fell silent. He could tell how much the property meant to her. His first instinct was to buy the land himself and find some way to turn it over to her, but if she came unglued over one lousy dress... "Who's selling it?"

"Al Hollencraft. They wanted to try a Catalina real-estate company first. If he doesn't sell it, they'll contact a Tucson company."

"Which could be us." What irony.

"Yes, I suppose. Turn at the next road. Now, see the big paloverde and that huge saguaro? There's a level spot to park, in the shade of the tree."

"Wow. Look at the yellow blooms on that baby. Nothing more gorgeous." He glanced at her. "In the plant world, I mean."

"You're a smooth talker, Cliff Hamilton."

"No, you're a beautiful sight on this spring day, Sarah Melton. And unless we get out of this truck immediately, I'm going to start kissing you, and all my efforts to provide food will be wasted."

Moments later they were sitting on the truck's tailgate, unwrapping sandwiches and sipping wine.

"I can see why you come to this place when the going gets rough, Sarah." Cliff took off his hat. "I love the quiet."

She swallowed a bite of sandwich. "Bologna?"

"You expected caviar?"

"As a matter of fact."

"The wine's imported. Very pricey. All part of my not-so-subtle attempt to reduce those mountains to molehills."

"Oh."

"You see, I like caviar," he admitted. "And expensive cheese and exotic fruit. I also like bologna and tuna fish and macaroni. I'm not a snob, Sarah. We can get along. Believe me."

Sarah looked down at the tender green of the wild grass sprouting beneath their feet. Springtime. A time for new beginnings. For changing old preconceptions. "I've been pretty thick-headed, haven't I?"

Cliff grinned. "If you insist."

"Sort of a reverse snobbery, in a way."

"Something like that."

"I always think better out here."

"And what do you think, Sarah Jane?"

She glanced up shyly. "I think I'm very lucky to be with you today."

"That's nice. Anything else?"

"Yes. I think if you don't kiss me in the next two seconds, I'll expire on the spot."

"Lady," he said, "I like the way you think."

His arms came around her as naturally as if they'd been kissing on tailgates for years. His lips found hers. Cushioning her head with his arm, Cliff eased her back on the truck bed as his kiss became more demanding.

She felt his shoulder muscles ripple under his soft cotton shirt. As his hips pressed into hers, she longed for much more than a kiss from him.

"Sarah, you know I want you."

"Yes."

"I can feel your heartbeat. You want me, too."

"Yes."

"But I don't want to make love to you here, beautiful as it is. Someone might happen along." He wove his fingers through her copper hair. "Come home with me, Sarah Jane."

AFTER THEY'D turned left off Skyline Drive, Sarah began searching the gray green hillsides for a house to fit her image, a structure that proclaimed the wealth of its owner.

Then, unexpectedly, the road veered to the right; and the house appeared, almost as if it had grown up from the desert floor. The one-story, sand-colored dwelling looked more like molded sculpture than architecture. Except for three garage doors, Sarah couldn't see a single right angle. She was surprised when the word "unpretentious" flashed into her mind.

Cliff reached for a plastic control box and one of the doors buzzed open. He pulled the truck into the interior and turned off the engine.

"We're here," he said.

The garage door opened into a kitchen that could provide for a hotel full of guests. If the outside of Cliff's house was unpretentious, the inside made up for it.

Gleaming tile floors occasionally gave way to thick scatter rugs positioned in front of massive pieces of furniture; she suspected they'd been hand carved in Mexico. As Sarah surveyed the curved bank of windows overlooking the city and the glass wall opposite with a view of the Catalinas,

she said brightly, "I hope you hold stock in Windex."

"They don't have to be washed all that often, because I don't have any little shavers putting handprints all over them." He walked up behind Sarah and slipped his arms around her waist. "That doesn't mean I'm against little shavers. How about you?"

"Cliff, I think we're being a little premature—"

"Oh? Why is that?"

"This is far too early to be considering a—commitment."

"Hmm." He nuzzled her ear. "You want to keep everything purely sexual, is that it?"

"No! I mean—I don't know what I mean."

"That's okay." His hands moved upward to cup her breasts. "A little confusion is allowed at a time like this," he murmured as his thumbs stroked her nipples to rigid attention. "I'm not the most clearheaded fellow in the world now, either."

Sarah moaned softly. "Your house is beautiful, Cliff."

"To hell with the house," he murmured, "I'm taking you to bed."

She turned in his arms and gazed up at him. "No," she corrected softly. "We're going together."

Arms entwined, they negotiated the wide hallway toward a double door.

"Take off your shoes," Cliff said. "You'll love walking barefoot. I just had this room redecorated."

Sarah glanced through the wide doorway and understood. Sunk two steps below the level of the rest of the house was the biggest bedroom and the widest bed she had ever seen. The ivory

plush carpet was so thick that she cried out in pleasure as her toes sank into it. The comforter was the same shade as the rug, and the only color in the room came from blue and green throw pillows on the bed.

For one wonderful moment Sarah allowed herself to believe the fantasy, to believe she could be Cliff's wife, mistress of this enormous house, mother of their children. Her brown eyes shone with the joy of it, and Cliff, seeing the future in her face, caught his breath.

"Yes, Sarah. We can have it all. Everything." He lowered his head to taste her lips, and she raised her mouth trustingly to him.

Gently he pulled her knit shirt up until he had to relinquish her lips to lift it over her head. Then he pushed her bra down over her arms and tossed both garments in a heap on the ivory carpet before turning back to her.

She stood proudly before him, breasts thrust forward, the tan outline of her bikini top pronounced in the sunlit bedroom. Under his gaze her nipples tightened, and his hand moved forward involuntarily.

"Do you know how exquisite you are?"

"I know you make me feel that way."

"God, how I love looking at you, touching you."

"It works two ways, Cliff," she breathed. "Fair is fair." For the first time in her life, she wanted to tease and entice a man, to aggressively arouse him, seduce him.

Her breasts quivered as she unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it from his

jeans. Deliberately she brushed lazily against him, and as she watched his piercing blue eyes become slumberous with desire, she felt a moment of triumph. She would always remember that look that told her he would sacrifice anything to make love to her.

Giddy with power, she bent her head to swirl her tongue past his coarse mahogany chest hair and capture his nipple between her teeth. His muffled groan encouraged her, and her fingers went boldly to his belt buckle. The belt was easy, and then one by one the metal fasteners of his jeans surrendered to her capable fingers.

Taunting him with her eyes, she hooked one finger inside the waistband of his briefs and moved it slowly back and forth. When he caught his breath, she moved her hand to caress the throbbing fullness of him through the confining cotton. She repeated the light movement, and he groaned and caught her hand.

"Fair is fair," he said hoarsely. "And you're ahead."

Sarah's laugh was rich with passion. "Is this the part where you swing me into your arms and carry me to the bed?"

"Not with a vixen like you," he breathed. "I'm saving my strength to humble you into submission, wench."

The edge of the mattress caught Sarah behind her knees, and she tumbled backward onto the fluffy comforter. Her eyes widened as Cliff dispensed with briefs and jeans in one swift movement that revealed the rigid evidence of his desire. Primitive passion flared in his blue eyes as he grabbed for the waistband of her jeans,

and instinctively she moved away, both aroused and intimidated by the sight of him.

Immediately his hand stilled in the act of unsnapping her jeans. "Too fast, Sarah?" he accused almost gruffly. "I guess so."

With a sigh he sank gently to the bed beside her.

"You startled me," she said softly.

"Sarah," he began, and his hand shook as he cupped her face, "all that playing around you did really turned me on, and all I could think of was getting the rest of our clothes off and taking you, perhaps even a little roughly. You didn't expect that, did you?"

"I—I guess not."

"You've got a powerful weapon, lady, and I think you need some lessons in how to use it."

"Cliff, I'm sorry. I—"

He interrupted her with a long, lingering kiss. "It's okay, Sarah Jane. We'll begin with lesson one. Pay attention." Gently he urged her back on the ivory comforter and planted light kisses down her neck and along her collarbone. Gradually his lips came closer and closer to the tingling peak of each breast, then retreated. She whimpered. "Pay attention, Sarah," he repeated.

He began making small forays with his tongue, circling close to each tight bud but never touching either one. Sarah writhed in frustration until at last, with a groan, she wound her fingers through Cliff's hair and pulled him roughly against her. "Please," she whispered urgently. As his tongue and

lips at last granted her wish, she arched her back and sighed in satisfaction.

Just before his mouth came back to cover hers, he murmured, "End of lesson one," and she felt his hand unfasten her jeans. Lifting himself away from her, he pulled off both her jeans and panties, then settled himself beside her again.

"Did you learn anything from lesson one?" he asked, his own reined-in passion flickering in his eyes.

"Perhaps," she murmured.

"I think you need lesson two." His head dipped to capture her lips again while his fingers stroked lightly along her inner thigh. He created lazy circles, spiraling ever upward on her soft skin. When he reached the top of her thigh, he brushed across the triangle of golden hair and continued the slow spiral down to the back of her knee. He charged his touch to a light massage but each time stopped just short of her heated core, until she began to moan softly and twist her hips from side to side.

Releasing her mouth, he slid down her body and feathered the inside of each thigh with his tongue and lips. The molten ache inside her became almost unbearable. But all he bestowed was the warmth of his breath as he kissed the pale skin at the top of her thigh—and stopped.

Her nails bit into his shoulders. "Cliff, I want you," she cried out hoarsely.

"Don't you want to play anymore?" he asked. His fingers trailed up her thigh to touch her intimately this time, and she gasped her answer. "No!"

"Wanting like this makes you feel a little wild, doesn't it, Sarah?" he said hoarsely. "Don't forget how you feel right now, because that's what you do to a man when you seduce him. He becomes a little wild, and he may move quickly because he needs you so much—"

"Love me, Cliff, now," she begged desperately.

"Gladly, my darling." But still he took his time, and when she felt him slowly enter her, she grasped his hips and pulled him deep inside with a fierce little cry.

"Oh, Sarah, I think you've learned your lesson," Cliff moaned and unleashed the fever of his own passion to bury himself in her again and again, mingling his cries with hers.

Afterward Sarah lay quietly listening to the sounds around her—Cliff's even breathing, the noisy chatter of a cactus wren outside the window. Lying in this magnificent ivory room, she could hardly imagine that at eleven tonight she'd be back in the emergency room X-raying patients.

No doubt about it—the house made her painfully aware of her poverty. Encouraging this madness between them was the most foolish thing she'd ever done, she acknowledged, turning her head and gazing lovingly at his sleeping face. They were wrong for each other, but how could she ever leave him?

The noise of a car engine became more pronounced, and Sarah heard the crunch of tires on gravel. She reached over quickly to shake Cliff's shoulder.

"I think someone's here," she whispered.

Her assertion was confirmed by footsteps on the brick walkway and the deep chime of the doorbell. Sarah scrambled to find her clothes.

"Don't worry. Probably just a salesman," Cliff mumbled, shoving his legs into his jeans.

Sarah heard the front door close. The visitor was a woman. "I shouldn't have bothered you on your day off, but his request upset me so," she said clearly.

"That's okay. But I'd better warn you I'm not alone."

Sarah froze. *Thanks a lot, Cliff.*

"A girl? Cliff, I'm sorry. But you've never brought anyone here, so I—I'll leave."

"No, don't go. I want you to meet her. You will sooner or later, anyway. Just a minute."

Sarah contemplated climbing out a window and hitchhiking home. How could he do this to her?

Cliff appeared in the double doorway looking sheepish. "Could you come out for a little while?"

"Cliff, this is embarrassing!" Sarah protested softly.

"I know, but I'm kind of glad it happened."

"Who's here?"

"My mother."

His answer paralyzed Sarah's vocal cords.

"Please, Sarah. It's the best way out of an uncomfortable situation. We can all handle it."

"Easy for you to say."

"No, it's not. I've never been in this situation with my mother before. But I don't like sneaking around. You're

not that type, either, so let's face the music."

A tiny woman with carefully coiffed gray hair and a golden tan turned from the windows overlooking the mountains. Her silken blouse and navy skirt exuded style; diamonds winked from her fingers.

"Hello, Mrs. Hamilton."

"Mom, you remember Sarah Melton. She and I belonged to the high school history club, and you've met her a few times at TMC, I think."

"Of course." Cora Hamilton smiled and held out her hand.

Sarah returned the brief handshake.

"Sarah was my lifesaver in the emergency room last weekend. We hadn't seen each other since high school, and we've been catching up on each other's lives."

Sarah struggled to think of a comment to fill the silence. Cliff had been giving her a tour of the house? She shot a look of appeal in his direction and noticed his shirt was buttoned unevenly.

Cora followed Sarah's horrified gaze, and a smile touched her lips. "Sorry, kids. Next time I'll call."

"Oh, that won't be necessary," Sarah began. "We won't—"

"Nice to meet you, Sarah. I'll be in touch later, Cliff."

"Wait." Cliff touched her arm. "Tell me about this party business."

His mother began to chuckle. "Cliff, dear, if I'm going to have a conversation with you without rolling on the floor, you'll have to rebutton your shirt."

He glanced down and grinned. "Oh." Then he put an arm around Sarah.

"Cliff, you shouldn't give your mother the wrong impression. Mrs. Hamilton, we're not—"

"Cora, dear. Call me Cora. And you don't need to explain anything right now."

"Tell us about the party, Mom," Cliff said.

"The party. Oh, yes." The sprightly expression vanished from her face. "Cliff, I just don't know what to do about your father."

Cliff guided her to the couch. "What's wrong?"

Sarah watched their interaction, how Cora became more uncertain and Cliff immediately rushed to the rescue.

"At the hospital this afternoon, your father decided his birthday was coming up, which it isn't, but you know how he is. Anyway, he demanded a big party. No gifts—you know how we used to do it—donations to charity. What should I do, Cliff?"

Cliff frowned. "I'll think of something."

Without thinking, Sarah asked, "Why not have the party?"

Cora glanced at her son. "Does Sarah know about your father?"

"I took her to see him yesterday morning."

"Then you realize, Sarah, that a huge party would be ludicrous. Cliff has convinced me to move Jack to a rest home, possibly within a few weeks."

"That's an even stronger reason to have the party."

"Sarah may be right, Mom."

"Oh, I don't know. Most of our friends don't know how bad he's become. I'd hate to burden them—"

"Hey, Mom. They all shared the good times, and I'll bet they'll share the bad, if you'll let them. Let's give Dad his party."

Cora dabbed furtively at one eye. "I suppose it is only fitting. That he go out with a bang."

"Absolutely," Cliff agreed. "We'll do it right—caterers, champagne, string quartet, house decorated. I'll help. And if Sarah's game, I'd like her to come, too."

"Oh, no, I—"

Cora glanced up. "Why, of course you'll come, dear. After all, it was your idea to grant his wish." She consulted her gold wristwatch. "I'd better go home and start planning. Might as well make it a week from Saturday night. Jack will be home, at least temporarily, until we finish the other arrangements."

"Sounds good to me," Cliff said to cover her distress. "Are you free a week from Saturday, Sarah?"

"I work this weekend, so yes, I'll be free."

"Wonderful." Cora Hamilton smiled bravely. "I'll have fun organizing a party again. I'm pretty good at that, once somebody makes the decision for me. It's been a pleasure, Sarah."

"Thank you . . . Cora."

"I'll check on Dad before I go to the office," Cliff said, showing his mother out. After closing the door, he turned to Sarah with a broad smile.

"You're terrific," he said. "The party's a wonderful idea, and Mom will have something to plan again."

"Cliff..." Sarah hesitated. "Your mother's quite a talented lady. Do you ever wonder if she's... had a real chance to grow, to explore her potential?" *Go easy, Sarah.*

"What do you mean? She doesn't have a carefree life with my dad in his present condition. I don't think she's worried about exploring her potential right now."

"What about in a few weeks? What then?"

"She'll find plenty to do. She always does."

"But, Cliff, why should she just find something? Why not ask her to get involved in Hamilton Realty?"

"In business? You've got to be kidding. That's a tough world. You have to be aggressive, persistent, thick-skinned..."

"I think your mother might be capable of running that business, Cliff." *If you stop babying her.*

"She has the charity work."

"Why should she do that when she could take over Hamilton Realty and leave you free to teach history, like you always dreamed of doing?"

"Sarah, my mother is fifty-five and she's never worked."

"The charity drives have taught her a lot, and she could learn the rest. Look at my father. He's retraining."

"But he's a—" Cliff stopped himself.

"But he's a man. Cliff, you're a chauvinist."

"A realist," he countered. "My mother's never shown the slightest in-

terest in real estate. And she leans on me for major decisions. You saw that."

"She leans because you allow it."

He shook his head. "I can't see it as a possibility."

Sarah bit her lip in frustration. She had no real right to push the matter in the first place.

He crossed the room and took her by the shoulders. "You're very quiet all of a sudden."

"Cliff, you've tried to prove we're compatible, but I'm afraid our differences are greater than you think."

"I can't accept that." He rubbed his hands up and down her arms. "Not after this afternoon."

"A relationship needs more than sex."

"We have more than that." He slid his hand over the curve of her cheek and threaded his fingers through her hair. Then he bent his head and kissed her parted lips gently until she trembled against him.

Slowly he drew away and gazed deep into her brown eyes. "My heart's going a mile a minute, Sarah. That doesn't happen with every woman I meet. I do love you, Sarah Jane Melton."

She let out her breath and tears misted her eyes.

"Don't cry. I'm very happy about it."

"So am I. That's why I'm crying. People in love cry a lot, didn't you know?"

"People like you?"

"Yes. I love you so much it hurts."

"Oh, God." He crushed her to him.

"I didn't expect you to say that, and now I'm crying."

"What a pair," Sarah mumbled, sniffing.

"Damn right we are. Oh, Sarah! You love me! Did you hear that, folks? Marvelous Melton loves me!"

As he shouted his delight, Sarah laughed through her tears. Would love be enough to see them through?

TWO DAYS LATER, as she stood facing an angry Cliff in his kitchen, she decided it wouldn't.

"What do you mean, you're not going to the party?"

"I can't afford it. I found a dress on sale but then realized I didn't have the right shoes. No one there will know me anyway."

"Only the host, who can't imagine not having the woman he loves beside him. And I have a solution."

"No."

"Sarah, it's because of me that you're going to the party. Why shouldn't I pay for your outfit?"

"I wouldn't feel right."

"Suppose we were married."

"We're not married."

"Then let's fix that. Consider yourself proposed to."

"Cliff! Don't be flip about something like that."

"I'm dead serious. Sarah, will you be my wife?"

She stared at him. "You mean it."

"Of course I mean it." He grabbed her hand. "I have something in my desk drawer that should convince you. I intended to broach this subject later, but the time seems to be now."

He drew her into the room he used as a home office and moments later placed a black velvet box in her hand.

"Open it."

She pried open the box. A graceful solitaire diamond ring glittered on its black velvet cushion.

"Share my life, Sarah. I love you more than you'll ever know."

She looked into his eyes, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Cliff, I'm not ready for this. We're not ready. Don't make me answer yet, please."

"Not exactly the enthusiastic response I hoped for." He sighed. "But not a definite refusal, either."

"No, not a refusal. A—a rain check."

"A rain check." He smiled crookedly. "Okay. Then how the hell am I supposed to get you to Dad's party?"

"I guess we'll go shopping for a dress and shoes."

*

"YES, THAT WAS the right dress." Cliff stood in the middle of Sarah's tiny living room while she twirled in front of him. "Right color, too. That sea green is beautiful with your hair. I'm a little afraid to take you to my mother's tonight, Sarah. Some liberated guy with less money and tougher trivia questions might snatch you."

She smoothed the lapel of his cream-colored sport jacket. "I'm not looking for someone else, Cliff. Don't worry about that."

"Thanks." He gathered her into his arms. "Can I even kiss you, pretty woman?"

Sarah gave herself up to the sweetness of his kiss, allowing herself to believe for this quiet moment, that all would be well.

THE HOUSE was everything Sarah had expected and hadn't seen in Cliff's own home. The two-story structure dominated the landscape, challenging the mountain backdrop with its elaborate pillars and sweeping porch topped with red Spanish tile. The windows reflected the sparkle of chandeliers and the polished glow of dark walnut furniture.

Cora Hamilton, clad in red georgette, materialized at Sarah's elbow the moment she and Cliff stepped into the cathedrallike living room.

"You look lovely, Sarah," Cora said, guiding her through the sleek, well-mannered gathering.

"Where's Mr. Hamilton?" Sarah looked around.

"Over in that easy chair, surrounded by his old cronies. So far, so good. He was making reasonable conversation the last time I checked. You were right to urge me to do this, Sarah."

"I hope so."

"I'm sure of it. Ah, there are the Hildebrants." Cora's voice rose in greeting. "And how is the famous luck of the Hildebrants? Have you still got that stock-market bull by the horns?"

"We try to hold on to some part of his anatomy, anyway," commented a portly man in his fifties. "Who's the sweet young thing with you, Cora?"

"This is Sarah Melton, a good friend of Cliff's. Sarah, I'd like you to meet Graham and Mitsy Hildebrant. By the way, folks, Sarah's an X-ray technician at TMC."

The smiling man and woman nodded as if they'd been told she was a brilliant young intern, and Sarah be-

gan to relax. Perhaps she could be herself among these people, after all.

"Have you known Cliff long, Sarah?" Mitsy asked.

"We went to high school together. Then we lost track of each other, but when Cliff had his accident, I was on duty."

"And high school sweethearts were reunited! How romantic!" Mitsy exclaimed.

Sarah flushed. "Well, not exactly. In high school we—"

"That's right," Graham put in. "I remember Cliff was pretty involved with Lace and John's daughter, Julie. Remember, Mitsy?"

Mitsy sipped her drink reflectively. "I can't recall the whole thing. Didn't our Jim date Julie for a while? But I guess maybe—somehow I don't remember you, Sarah. Were you at Cliff's graduation party? Or that thing we had after the prom...?"

"No, I—" Sarah's head began to throb.

"Here comes John now," Mitsy interrupted.

Sarah flinched. This must be Julie DeWeese's father, and now all these terribly sophisticated people would discuss Cliff and Julie's dating days. And why shouldn't they? She was the outsider here.

"John, weren't Julie and Cliff an item in high school? We got on the subject because Sarah, here, ran around with our kids, and we're trying to remember—"

"No, Mrs. Hildebrant, I didn't—" Sarah began, but she was cut off by John DeWeese.

"Julie and Cliff dated in high school," he said smoothly. "Back then, Cliff was hell-bent on becoming a history professor. Julie figured out that wasn't the sort of life she wanted. By the time Cliff woke up to the realities of life, Julie was taken."

Sarah bristled. "I understood Cliff left graduate school to help his father."

"Is that right?" John DeWeese's silver eyebrows rose. "You know him so well, then? What's your last name again? I can't seem to place you."

"I tried to say before that I didn't belong to Cliff's crowd in high school."

"John, Sarah came to the party with Cliff tonight," Mitsy said, glancing nervously at Sarah.

"That's nice," DeWeese said. "Cliff's a good catch." His slate-colored eyes seemed to take in every detail about Sarah.

He's deciding I don't belong here, she concluded bitterly.

"Where did you go to school, Sarah?" He waited like a cat at a gopher hole. "Vassar? Bryn Mawr?"

"No." Sarah's fingers grew ice cold. "I couldn't afford to go away to school like the rest of your children." Her eyes swept the small group. "My father was a copper miner, and I trained at Pima College. That's where I've been since high school. Now if you'll excuse me, I want to wish Mr. Hamilton a happy birthday."

Head high, she walked away from the group. Let them think what they wanted. She'd never meet any of them again, anyway. This party showed her

why a life with Cliff Hamilton was impossible.

Blinking back her tears, she approached Jack Hamilton.

"Happy birthday, Mr. Hamilton."

The older man looked up with a twinkle in his eye. "I don't think it's really my birthday," he confided. "But everyone's having such a great time I hate to tell them. Are you one of Cliff's friends?"

Sarah hesitated. "Yes." A true friend would break off a relationship that could only bring heartbreak to both of them, she thought.

"I didn't catch your name."

"Sarah Melton."

Through a shimmer of tears, Sarah watched Cliff take a glass from his mother and work his way toward her. The best thing she could do for this man she loved was to let him continue his life as he'd been living it before she'd arrived on the scene. When he took her home tonight, their fantasy would come to an end.

SARAH'S red-rimmed eyes swept the lush spring growth around her. Last night's confrontation, the angry words, the uncomprehending look on Cliff's face, wouldn't leave her, despite the golden beauty of the paloverdes and the violet contrast of the ironwoods.

Angrily she started the Volkswagen's motor and drove the rutted road back to the highway. As long as she was this far, she might as well visit her parents.

Their mobile home looked shabbier than she'd remembered it. She found her mother leaning over a large kettle

of soup. "Don't they ever let you out of the kitchen, lady?" she asked, kissing her cheek.

"Sarah! What a nice surprise." Ann Melton smiled at her daughter, then took a closer look. "You've either got spring allergies, or something's wrong. Your eyes are a mess."

Sarah plopped into a seat at the kitchen table. How many times had she sat in this same chair and discussed her boyfriend problems with her mother? But they all seemed so childish now.

Her mother poured two cups of coffee and sat down. "Okay, what gives?"

"Do you remember Cliff Hamilton?"

Her mother looked startled. "Why, yes, as a matter of fact. Your father and I were just—"

"He turned up in the TMC emergency room not long ago," Sarah said, rushing through the story before she lost her nerve. Briefly she outlined recent events, skimming over the obvious fact that she and Cliff had made love.

Predictably, her mother zeroed in on that. "If you're sexually involved with this man, then you don't have to tell me how much you value the relationship. Are you sure things couldn't be worked out?"

"I don't see how. Cliff has resisted asking his mother to become involved in the business, even though I know he's unhappy. But then, I don't know if he'd be content with a college professor's salary."

"If he's put time and effort into the business, I'd think his mother would insist he take a share of the profits,

Sarah. He wouldn't have to live entirely on a teaching income."

"I hadn't thought of that," she said. Then she shook her head. "He wouldn't take money from a business when he wasn't contributing."

Her mother reached out and touched Sarah's hand. "Are you sure you can't accept the situation as it is?"

"Yes, I'm sure." She smiled forlornly. "I would always believe Cliff had shortchanged himself, and his mother. That's no way to make a marriage work."

"Did you tell him all that?"

"No. Then he might feel blackmailed into changing everything just so I'd stay. That's not right, either."

Ann Melton lifted one eyebrow, then rose to check the soup.

DURING LUNCH Sarah learned that the real-estate agent, Al Hollencraft, wasn't bringing out many prospects to look at the land.

"Al suggested we get somebody in Tucson. He knows how much we need the money," her father said.

"Have you got anyone in mind?"

"No," her mother said too quickly.

Sarah noticed the look that passed between her parents. "What about Hamilton Realty?"

Her father cleared his throat. "Your mother...told me briefly in the kitchen about your, ah, involvement with Cliff Hamilton, and I don't see any reason to—"

Sarah took a deep breath. "That's silly. If Hamilton Realty is the best company for the job, then that's who you should hire. I doubt if Cliff would handle our property himself anyway."

She raised her eyes and looked from one concerned face to the other. And then, slowly, a plan began to take shape in her mind. Perhaps her precious land wouldn't be lost, after all. She had enough in her college account for the down payment and the rest could be financed. But she would buy the land anonymously.

"I'll go see Cliff myself," Sarah said. "Okay, Mom?"

"I think you're right to go," Ann Melton said, and her eyes sparkled.

"Now, Mom," Sarah cautioned brusquely, "I can see the wheels turning. This is business, nothing more." She had meant it when she said she and Cliff were through. Why, then, was her stomach doing flip-flops at the thought of tomorrow's mission?

"OKAY, let me get this straight." Two days later, Sarah's father paced the worn carpet in his living room. "After we sign the listing papers, Cliff Hamilton wants you to show him the property?"

"That's his condition, Dad," Sarah said.

"Can this man be trusted with our daughter, Ann?"

Sarah's mother hid a smile. "I'm sure he can, David. I remember him as a very nice boy in high school." She turned to Sarah. "It's obvious he wants to talk with you alone, Sarah. You can show him the property as well as either of us, and I think you ought to hear him out. I give him credit for being an enterprising suitor."

"Suitor! Now just a minute, I—"

"I suggest we hold the noise down," her father cautioned. "Someone just drove up in an old pickup truck."

"That's him."

Her father looked confused. "I thought one of your objections to this man was that he was too high-toned?"

"Don't let the truck fool you, Dad. He also owns a Mercedes."

Sarah heard Cliff's step on the porch. "You must be Cliff Hamilton," her father said as he opened the door before Cliff could knock. "Come on in. I'm David Melton, Sarah's father."

"Glad to meet you." Cliff shook her father's hand. "I understand you're into computers these days."

Sarah's father nodded. "I hope an old dog can learn new tricks."

"If you're anything like your daughter, I imagine you can do whatever you set your mind to, Mr. Melton."

"I hope you're right. I'd like you to meet my wife, Ann. It was her idea to sell some of her grandfather's land to pay my tuition."

"And Grandpa would have approved," Ann Melton added. "He believed in looking toward the future. We have to adjust to the times, don't you agree, Cliff?"

"I guess you're right, Mrs. Melton." Cliff took the woman's outstretched hand. Judging by her assessing glance, he knew Sarah had been talking about him, about their relationship. Ann Melton was sizing him up.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded document. "Here's the listing agreement, Mr. Melton. Al

Hollencraft supplied me with the property description."

Sarah's father put on his reading glasses and unfolded the papers. "The listing looks fine to me," he said after a few moments, and handed the papers to his wife. "You study it, Ann. You're the financial wizard in this family."

"Take your time," Cliff said. "Sarah promised me a tour of the property. I'll pick up the agreement when I bring her back."

Silently she preceded him out the door. He opened the passenger's side of the truck, and before she could climb in, he boosted her up to the seat, holding her a moment longer than was necessary. She began to shake.

"You can't deny your feelings, you know."

"Let's go, Cliff."

"All right." He closed the truck door.

By the time he swung up beside her, she had made a decision. "Cliff, this isn't going to work."

He started the truck. "Sure it is."

"I thought I could deal with you on this, but I'm not that strong. Can you take me home? You don't have to look at the property at all if I'm the buyer."

"You agreed to this, Sarah."

"I didn't realize—"

"That you can't turn love off that easily? I thought you were smarter than that, Marvelous Melton."

Her parents' trailer disappeared from sight and she was alone with Cliff Hamilton—a precarious situation, indeed. "I'm not very smart," she said. "I'm dumb, in fact. Dumb to imagine

we could ever bridge the gaps between us."

"What damn gaps? Is it the money?"

"Not exactly. In a way, but..."

"Is it because I won't ask my mother to take over the business so I can play college professor?" Cliff turned onto the dirt road leading to the property. "Well, I guess that's it. Why won't you say so?"

"That's only part of the problem, Cliff," she said at last when he parked under the giant paloverde. "I'm afraid the way you treat your mother is the way you'd treat me. I don't want you to put me on a pedestal."

He faced her, his blue eyes intense. "My happiness is you, Sarah."

"No," she whispered. "No, I don't think so."

"You're making this all so difficult. Why couldn't I buy this property from your parents? Why couldn't we get married and build a house on it?"

"I'd feel like a leech. I'd be contributing to the end of your dream, just as your mother is, without knowing it."

"But I love you both!"

She wanted so much to touch him. "I know, but that kind of love could smother me, Cliff."

"All right. Suppose I get my mother into the business. Would that make you happy?"

"No, because you don't really believe it's the right decision, and you've got to be behind it a hundred percent for it to work. I can't be the reason for it."

Cliff hit the steering wheel with his fist. "Damn it, Sarah. You don't leave us any room, do you?"

"That's because we don't belong together. I understand that now. You should continue to run Hamilton Realty, and your mother should do her charity work."

"Where do you fit into this little picture?"

"That's just it, Cliff. I don't."

"The hell you don't." In one movement he pulled her into his arms and brought his lips down on hers.

She squirmed in his firm grip, trying to wrench away from his kiss, but he held her fast. Her heart hammered against her ribs as he forced his tongue into her mouth and demanded her response. At her moan of desire, he fumbled with the buttons of her blouse.

"No, Cliff," she cried as his lips moved to her throat.

"You won't listen to logic," he said hoarsely. "I may not have your mind, but I sure as hell have your body." He unsnapped her bra and cupped one breast. "You can't deny what happens when I touch you like this."

"No, I can't." She was panting now. "But don't do this, Cliff. Don't try to use sex to change my mind."

Suddenly he was quiet. "You're right," he murmured, looking into her flushed face. "If our love isn't strong enough to change your mind, I don't want what your body offers, no matter how sweet. You win, Sarah Jane."

The stricken look on Cliff's face as he turned away from her burned itself into Sarah's brain. In the long days and nights that followed, the agony in his blue eyes haunted her, no matter how often she told herself their sepa-

ration was for the best. But why did it have to hurt so much?

The property sale was accomplished through intermediaries, and Sarah didn't see Cliff during the transaction. He didn't try to make personal contact, but after their last encounter, Sarah wasn't surprised.

Her parents were overjoyed with the land sale, and Sarah managed to change the subject whenever they brought up the mysterious buyer they'd never met.

Summer arrived with a vengeance, and in July the summer monsoon added humidity to the furnace-hot air. Sarah's trips to her parents' trailer became increasingly uncomfortable without air-conditioning in her car, but she enjoyed watching her father's progress. His training was nearly finished, and he was considering several job offers.

During her trips to Catalina Sarah usually tried to ignore the Hamilton Realty signs she passed on her way out of town. Reading Cliff's name didn't help her state of mind. But in spite of her resolve, a new bit of frontage that had been scraped clean of desert growth caught her eye and the name beneath the Hamilton Realty logo caused her to swerve to the side of the road and look again. It was Hamilton, all right. Cora Hamilton.

*

"Hi, DAN. What's new?" Sarah wheeled the X-ray machine along as the paramedic fell into step beside her.

"Not much. Say, remember that crazy crowd that was filming over at Fort Lowell last spring?"

"Mmm-hmm." Did she ever.

"On the way in, I noticed they're back at it again."

"That's interesting." Her pulse quickened.

Sarah parked the X-ray machine in its accustomed spot and walked down the hall to finish some paperwork. So Martin Laramour was back, along with F Troop.

Several weeks had passed since she'd noticed Cora Hamilton's name on the sign. Once she'd seen it, Sarah had expected Cliff to call announcing that he'd taken her suggestion and now they could pick up where they'd left off.

But the call hadn't come, and Sarah was confused. More than that, she was anxious to find out what was going on in Cliff's head. Perhaps Pat or Maureen would tell her. Cliff probably wasn't at the encampment, anyway. And if he was, so what?

Minutes after her shift was over, she was sitting in her Volkswagen a little distance away from the encampment. She got out and walked cautiously toward the row of tents.

She recognized several of the women, gathered around the fire circle. All the men were mounted and practicing charges in the open field. Sarah couldn't tell whether Cliff was among the soldiers, but a tan pickup was parked next to Pat and Maureen's camper.

The familiar scene, complete with the film crew barking orders, brought an ache to her heart.

"Sarah! Sarah Melton!" Maureen's dark hair bounced against her shoulders as she ran forward. "Does Cliff know you're here?"

"No, I..."

"Would you rather he didn't know?"

"In a way. I heard you were all over here, and I stopped to say hello, that's all."

"Why not stay?"

"How long will they be out there?"

"Another fifteen minutes, at least. Then there won't be another cavalry scene until this afternoon. Coffee?"

"Maybe just one cup. I really don't want to see Cliff. I just wanted—"

"To know how he is? Terrible." Maureen handed her a tin cup of steaming coffee. "He and Pat stayed up last night drinking some of Pat's famous beer. Cliff is miserable without you, Sarah. Won't you talk with him?"

"He can't be very unhappy, Maureen. He hasn't called me. Why wouldn't he at least do that, if he wants to patch things up?"

"I can't answer that one. And I can't keep this visit of yours a secret from him. That wouldn't be right."

"Okay, then don't say anything this weekend, but next time you see him, just say you ran into me and I asked about him. Then he can do whatever he wants with that information."

"I'm not wild about the idea, but if you insist."

"I do." Sarah drained her cup. "Thanks for the coffee. I'd better get going before they come back."

"I think you're making a mistake, and Cliff will probably kill me if he ever finds out, but you're the boss. Goodbye, Sarah. Nice seeing you again."

"Goodbye, Maureen. And thanks."

Sarah turned and walked back through the cottonwoods. Why had she parked so far away, she thought.

She felt, rather than heard, the hoofbeats behind her, and before she could whirl around, strong arms pulled her up on the tall horse's saddle.

"And where the hell did you think you were going?"

Sarah twisted and looked into flashing blue eyes below a Union soldier's cap. She smiled weakly. "Who was vice president under Herbert Hoover?"

"Charles Curtis. How could you show up here and then try to sneak away?"

"Ah-ha. But do you know who ran against Franklin Pierce in 1852?"

"No, and I don't care."

"Don't care? What kind of talk is that?"

"Shut up, Marvelous Melton." He kissed her soundly, leaving her gasping for breath. "Now will you tell me what this is all about?"

She clung to him. "Aren't you hot in this uniform?"

"As a matter of fact, this jacket is very warm. Let's take a little ride to your apartment where I can slip into something more comfortable."

"To my apartment? That's four blocks away! You can't ride a horse to my apartment, especially dressed like that. People will think you're crazy."

"I don't care." He clucked to the horse, and they started across the park.

"Cliff, put me down this minute. I'll tell you whatever you want to know, but let's not make a spectacle of ourselves. Where will we put this horse? I'll be evicted."

"I don't care."

"You don't care. Is that all you can say?"

"Not by a long shot. But you've got some explaining to do. Why did you come to the park?"

"I, um, was curious about how you... That is, I—I saw your mother's name on a Hamilton Realty sign."

"Oh, really? How long ago?"

"Three weeks. Naturally. I wondered about it."

"You must not have wondered about it much, if it took three weeks to contact me."

"I expected you might contact me."

"And risk having you accuse me of engineering it for your benefit? Fat chance. And by the way, Pierce's opponent in 1852 was Winfield Scott."

"Can't I ever stump you?"

"Yep. What's going on in that pretty head of yours, Sarah Jane? Am I the hero or the villain?"

"I—How's your mother doing?"

"Great. She loves the real-estate business. You were dead right about that, Sarah."

Cliff guided the horse between two parked cars and reined him to a stop at Sarah's front stoop. "We're here. Let's go in." He jumped down and helped Sarah.

"This is ridiculous. You can't leave a horse out here."

"I imagine your landlord would prefer him out here to in your living room. Look, I can tie him to your front porch. What I have to say needs privacy, Sarah."

Eyeing the tethered horse dubiously, she unlocked the door to her apartment. Cliff followed her in.

"Now," he said, grasping her by the shoulders, "I have to know if you still care about me at all, if you came to the park today out of idle curiosity or..."

The cold chunk of misery lodged inside her heart melted under the warmth of his gaze. She couldn't play games any longer. "Because I still love you," she whispered.

"Oh, Sarah." He drew her into his arms and claimed her mouth with a tremulous sigh.

Joyously she answered the passion in his kiss, parting her lips and welcoming the thrust of his tongue. She wrapped her arms around him. God, it was good to hold him again.

At last he released her and gazed into her flushed face. "Do you believe I didn't bring my mother into the business just to please you? Because I didn't. In fact, at the time I suggested the job I'd vowed never to see you again."

"Has your mother agreed to take over the business eventually so you can go back to history?"

"Yes, but I'm not going back right away, Sarah."

She grew rigid in his arms. "Why not?"

"Don't get all huffy. We can't afford it just yet. Not if we're getting married, and you're going to school."

"Wait a minute. You're not putting me through school, and as for getting married—"

"Hold it, Sarah! My God, you can be difficult. Listen to me. I've stood by while you spent your college fund on your parents' land. I'm trying to

change my attitude about protecting the women I love. Can't you bend a little?"

"I don't want you slaving away at a job you don't like so that I can go to school."

"The job's not that bad. I don't ever intend to give up my real-estate license completely. Why throw away a chance for extra money? Let's have the best of both worlds, Sarah. First you'll get your bachelor's, and then we'll go to graduate school together part-time."

"If we go to school part-time, you'll sell real estate, but what will I do?"

He worked the rubber band from the end of her braided hair. "We'll consider that when we get there. Maybe you're good at selling real estate."

He unwound her braid and ran his fingers through the copper waves. "Would you like that?" he said softly.

"Cliff... it all seems so simple."

"That's because it is. Don't make it complicated by trying to balance the scales exactly. Let love do that."

She searched his face, wanting to believe him.

"Sarah, have you ever felt like this about another human being?"

She shook her head.

"Neither have I. We belong together for a lifetime, Sarah."

At last the doubts were gone, and her radiant smile gave her decision more eloquently than words. Cliff's exultant laughter filled the small living room as he swept her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom. For both of them the aching loneliness was over at last.

Outside Sarah's front door the horse pricked his ears at the soft cries coming from inside. He shifted his feet and

gazed at the closed door. Then all was quiet, and he resumed munching on the bush beside the porch.



W	A	R	N		A	R	C		C	A	R	T
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**DIXIE
BROWNING**
East of Today



Wary of all men because of a philandering
father, Kate Brown keeps Cameron Greyville
at arm's length, even while falling
in love with him.



As a beginning to a new venture, the day hadn't been all that promising, Kate admitted to herself as she left the Realtor's office. The eight-hour drive would have put a damper on her usual ebullience without the flat tire, the spilled coffee on her brand-new yellow wraparound, and now this!

Sorry, the secretary had said, but Mr. Elliott was in Florida at a convention. She could pick up the key from Mrs. Greyville at the main house.

What main house? From the instructions, she would have trouble enough locating the bridge to the privately owned island where she *thought* she had leased the only house. Mr. Elliott had assured her he had the ideal location, and since it was away from the village of Hatteras, she should have all the room and privacy she needed. The house was old, he had said, but the rooms were large, and he had arranged for four single beds in each of the two big bedrooms; plus one in each of the smaller rooms.

She found the bridge and paused at its crest to view Coranoke Island for the first time. Perfect! Low and marshy on one end, wooded knolls over to the north and a sandy shoreline with a tall, gaunt house that had not seen paint for generations, if ever. It reminded her of an elderly spinster who lived in the apartment house she had just vacated, and she dubbed her summer home the Gray Lady. Fitting,

too, as it belonged to a family called Greyville.

The sandy road split soon after leaving the bridge, and she had no trouble determining which was the main house. A large, shingled home with well-kept gray trim and deep porches furnished with brightly cushioned redwood, it crowned a wooded knoll, sheltering under tall loblolly pines, enormous live oaks and smaller bay trees.

So delighted was she with its appearance that she quite forgot to be disappointed at her lack of privacy on the island as she knocked on the paneled door.

After a minute she knocked again and looked around for a bell. None was in sight but there was a car in the garage, an impressive gunmetal gray sedan; so she knew someone must be home. She wandered around the back and, turning a corner, heard a soft, teasing giggle. Following the sound, she saw a bikini-clad girl with red-gold hair and a terrific tan throw herself across a figure in a huge hammock and begin to tickle and tease in a manner that brought a flush to Kate's face.

"Uh—excuse me," she began, and the girl twisted around to stare open-mouthed at Kate while her partner tried to regain his feet.

A hammock is no place for sudden moves and Kate watched, amusement lifting the tiredness from her clear,

gray-green eyes at the sight of that tall, somehow forbidding-looking man playing footsies with his wife.

Unfortunately, he saw her look, and he was *not* amused as he disengaged himself from both blonde and ham-mock to stand before her. His tanned body reflected perfect physical condition, and not even his untidy dark blond hair could rob him of a certain air of authority. One dark, slashing eyebrow lifted in his rather aquiline face. Kate suddenly wished she had not gone poking around in strange backyards. She turned to the man's wife, unwilling to suffer any longer the scrutiny of his hard amber eyes.

"Mrs. Greyville, at the Realtor's office said you'd have the key to the other house. I'm Kate Brown—I've leased it for the season, you'll recall." Before the words had faded, Kate was wondering what sort of mistake she had made. The other woman's expression combined surprise and a sort of sly amusement, and she cut her wide, china blue eyes at her husband as if inviting him to share in the joke.

But the man only glared at Kate, his hands resting insolently on hips left bare above low-slung homespun jeans, and his gaze left none of her untouched. He would have towered above her own five foot six even on level ground, but standing above her on the porch, he had an unfair advantage, and Kate, who had driven four hundred miles, suddenly ran out of patience. She had sunk almost all her savings into this venture, the lease being the largest part of it, and she was in no mood now to play games with some petty tyrant.

"The key, if you please," she snapped, staring right back at him.

"Mrs. Greyville isn't here, but if you insist, I'll see if I can locate the key. I don't suppose you'd consider finding other accommodations?"

"Of course not! I was told that this was the only place suitable for my needs on either island and I paid a whacking good sum for it. I assure you, I have an official, airtight lease, and I'm not about to give it up and start all over again!"

He turned and slammed into the house while she waited. Uncomfortably aware of the scrutiny of a pair of rather vacant-looking blue eyes, she studied the distant shoreline until she was drawn to return the stare. The girl was certainly rude, but except for a petulant expression she was remarkably pretty.

No telling who she was, Kate mused as her anger slowly drained away and she heard her reluctant landlord return. She accepted the grudgingly proffered key with mumbled thanks and stalked away.

The Gray Lady, for all its unprepossessing appearance at the edge of the Pamlico Sound, suited her purposes admirably. She had carefully selected her applicants so that the sexes fit evenly into the two large bedrooms, more like dormitories now. The living room would be perfect for an indoor studio. The bathroom was ancient but adequate, and the kitchen was something from a Victorian nightmare, but she had no doubts that Annie could cope.

At the end of the lush row of olean-
ders that bordered the drive to the

other house, Kate saw a discreet sign announcing the house as Bay Oaks. Well, unless her directional knob was out of kilter, Gray Lady was west and Bay Oaks was east, and never the twain should meet. She had come far enough east, anyway, settling for this drawing card of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore Park.

THE WATER was deliciously hot, and she soaked thankfully in the claw-footed old tub, wondering what Iola and Frances were doing now. She must remember to call her sister France. Now that she had decided to go for a stage career, the name Frances Brown had been examined for star quality and was found lacking.

Kate sighed and squeezed a sponge full of scented water over her shoulders. She missed them already. Iola, her mother, had been divorced since Kate was fifteen and France nine and they had more or less raised each other since. Kate had been the most practical of the trio, and she had worked to augment her mother's small annuity and to put herself through college. Iola added to their tight budget with the occasional sale of an article, for she was a free-lance writer of the freest sort.

France was almost twenty-one now and truly beautiful. She resembled their mother with her blond hair and brown eyes. Kate was the plain one, with her unremarkable features and average coloring. That more than a few men had found her worth pursuing did nothing to change her mind about her own appearance, nor did it bother her that she lacked her sister's beauty. She

possessed a marketable talent, and a practical business head, and by the end of the summer session, Kate intended to have saved enough to send her sister to England, to audition at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art.

She allowed the water to gurgle away while her mind touched on another factor in her decision to strike out on her own. Hal Brookwood.

With a mutter of impatience, she dried herself with a thick towel and stepped into her yellow lawn pajamas. They smelled faintly of a wildflower sachet she favored.

Almost too tired to sleep after making ten beds, Kate suddenly remembered that her last meal had been a hamburger and coffee early that afternoon at Manteo. She had yet to shop for groceries but there were still two of the hard-boiled eggs she had brought from home and possibly a little coffee in her thermos.

She had just peeled both eggs and sat at the red Formica-topped table in the kitchen, when the door opened to admit her landlord.

"You are Mr. Greyville, aren't you?" she asked, intent on getting to the bottom of it all before chastising him for not knocking.

He crossed the kitchen uninvited and pulled out a chair, swinging it around, then dropped into it. "Right. Cameron Greyville, Miss... Brown? I just now discovered the details of your lease from my grandmother, and since your light was still on, I thought we might discuss it."

Still indignant at his late intrusion, she was totally forgetful of her own

casual attire, and she glared at him balefully.

"Look, Miss Brown. The agent evidently misplaced my last instructions, which were *not* to rent the house this season. I intend to spend a great deal of time here, and I need peace and quiet. I tried to reach him tonight but was told he'd gone off to some convention."

At least he seemed in a more amenable mood, Kate thought wryly, intent, no doubt, on talking her around. He looked as if no one had ever dared say no to him.

"I can arrange for you to have accommodation at a motel for the entire summer for the same amount you would have paid for this old place," he told her. "Shall I make the call?"

The eyes she remembered as golden brown looked almost black and completely expressionless.

"Sorry. It wouldn't suit me. And I've had the agent replace the bedroom furniture with cots and store the living room things to make way for my tables. The place is perfect and we're all set to start."

"We? I thought you were alone, Miss Brown. It is Miss?" His glance touched her hand and her fingers clenched involuntarily.

"Day after tomorrow, Mr. Greyville, there will be nine others besides myself staying here," she informed him. She might not be *Mrs.* Kate Brown, but she was sure enough Kate Brown, A.W.S., and that signified her hard-earned inclusion into the nation's most prestigious watercolor society.

She was unprepared for his explosion. "Nine! Good Lord, why?"

"Ten including myself, Mr. Greyville, and what do you mean, why? Because they're paying good money to spend two weeks down here, studying watercolor with me. Then they'll leave and another group will take their place. Why else would I need a place this size?"

"Studying watercolor!"

Her small store of patience ran out. "Look, I explained to your Mr. Elliott..."

"He's not my Mr. Elliott!"

"Well, it's hardly *my* fault if you can't keep up with your own property! I leased this place in good faith for a legitimate business venture, and I don't *think* you'll find a loophole, Mr. Greyville, no matter how badly you want me out of here. And now, if you *don't* mind, I'd like to go to bed!" It was only then that she realized she had been sitting there in her thin cotton pajamas, and it must have dawned on him at the same time; for she felt his glance drop down to her throat and the roundness below. Once more she felt hot color rise to her face.

This was getting to be ridiculous! Already she had blushed more in one day than she had in the past fifteen years.

"Why couldn't you have stayed home and taught your painting classes?" he demanded.

"Because to attract people who are willing to pay top prices, you have to have more than one drawing card."

"The island being one," he sneered, "and I suppose *you're* the other?"

"You're darned right I am!"

"At least you're open about it. I've yet to meet a woman who didn't want to know, first, how much she could get and, second, how little she could give in return!"

Which seemed to Kate a harsh judgment for trying to make a living. "Does that go for your little hammock mate?" she asked sweetly.

"That, Miss Brown, is none of your business."

"Well, all I have to say is that any poor fool of a woman who's interested in you would *have* to be after your money, because you obviously don't have anything else to offer her."

She flinched from the flaring of his nostrils and the sparks that shot from his eyes, but before she could make an apology, he had turned on his heel and left, slamming the door behind him.

Long after she crawled wearily between the sheets, she was aware of something tingling in the atmosphere that hadn't been there before. It was the feeling of expectancy one senses sometimes before a severe electrical storm.

KATE AWAKENED early the next morning completely restored. She pulled on a pair of white jeans and a coral bouclé top and hurried outdoors to greet the day.

There were gulls wheeling, and a fresh breeze off the water made her wrinkle her nose in delight at the tantalizing blend of odors. She was determined to explore her surroundings before heading for the grocery store in Hatteras. This was her last free day for the next two weeks.

She came to a small, weathered wharf and admired the reflections of the two boats moored there—one a sleek new fiberglass runabout, the other a wooden skiff. She might be able to borrow it sometime. It would be fun to explore the coastline.

"Hello there," called someone from behind her.

Turning easily, she saw a tiny gray-haired woman in orange pants and a wild-print smock. She was carrying a trowel in one hand and a basket in the other. "I heard you'd arrived. Hope you didn't have any trouble getting in. I was at a garden club meeting. Look." She held out her basket. "Bottle-brush. It's Australian. Going to try it in the shelter of the house. What do you think?"

Bemused, Kate held out her hand.

"So you're Kate Brown, huh? Will you come up to the house for some coffee? I haven't had mine yet—wanted to get these seedlings out."

The other woman had begun walking back in the direction of Bay Oaks, but Kate held back doubtfully. She didn't think the owner of the island would welcome an intrusion at this early hour, although after last night she owed him one.

"I don't think I'd better, Mrs.... Miss...."

"Oh, call me Dotty. Cam says I am—dotty, that is. Cam is my grandson. Cam Greyville."

"Oh. Then you're Mrs. Greyville?"

"Dotty Greyville. Coffee now? Don't hold back on Cam's account. He won't bite while I'm around, and that so-called secretary of his won't be

up until someone tosses a stick of dynamite into her room."

"Yes, well, all the same, I think I'll stay out and enjoy the morning a few minutes more before I head for the grocery store," Kate said.

Dotty dropped onto a lichen-covered bench under the oaks and Kate followed suit, amused to see a collection of gems that would have paid her salary several times over on the gnarled, dirt-covered hands. They fell into a discussion of Kate's plans and then Dotty went on to talk about her grandson. "Stays up there in New York as long as he has to, then he slips away down here where he does his real work. He's the chief design engineer for Greyville Electronics. He loves it down here—says it's the only place he can hear himself think—but that pink-haired popsie comes trailing after him every chance she gets, and Lord knows how anybody can concentrate with her and her radio around."

"She's awfully pretty," Kate ventured.

"Humph! Her type's easy enough to find, but he's not the marrying kind, thank the Lord."

"You don't want him to marry?" Kate asked curiously, dismayed at her own interest.

"Not one of those, I wouldn't. How'd you like to be shut up in the house for a long rainy spell with a pink-haired, half-naked female who talks baby talk? You'd see Miss Bebe Gonlon hightailing it back up north if ever the bottom fell out of Greyville stock, and don't think Cam doesn't know it. His feet are planted firmly on the ground."

I'll just bet they are, Kate thought grimly. If she ever saw a man who looked as if he could hold his own against any odds it was Cameron Greyville. She decided later on, when she was putting away enough food for the first few days after spending an alarming amount of money for groceries, that she was going to like Dotty Greyville very much. The old woman with her pixie haircut and outspoken opinions was something of a tartar, but then, Kate never had cared for namby-pambies.

*

THE NEXT morning Kate was up again before six, looking forward to a few hours of glorious solitude. She had mentioned the skiff to Dotty yesterday and got permission to use it.

The skiff handled well, and Kate managed to work her way to a shoal she had spotted earlier. She rolled her pants legs up before jumping out to haul her boat up onto the hard sand. It was far heavier than it looked, but she gave it a shove and secured it the best she could.

There was not a whole lot to see. Overhead a single gull protested the invasion of his privacy and she grinned up at him. "You, too? Fie on you!"

She walked on, her grin fading. So far, except for Dotty, she had found scant welcome here. It took time, of course, to become established in any new neighborhood, but that Cameron Greyville was the most aggravating man, with an arrogant manner. Hard to imagine his being Dotty's grandson, but then again, like didn't always breed like.

She concentrated for a while on the colors, painting in her mind, arguing with herself as she sat on the sand and gazed across the Sound to the invisible mainland.

It was some time before she recognized her name among the ambient sounds—and the impatient buzz of a distant outboard motor. She searched the horizon before she saw two figures on the wharf of Coranoke. One was waving and the other was Cameron Greyville. She would have recognized that lean, powerful build anywhere—and the man beside him looked familiar, as well.

Hoping that she was mistaken, she turned toward the skiff, only to see it drifting away. Darn! She should have thought of tides, but it hadn't occurred to her that the water could rise so much in such a short time.

The air was suddenly rent by an angry roar and she looked up, startled, to see the runabout heading for the shoal. There was only one man in the cockpit.

"Jump in," Cameron ordered, giving her barely time to settle before peeling off to circle the skiff. He scooped up the bow line and made it fast to a cleat behind him.

The ride was completed in utter silence, if one discounted the roar of all that horsepower. Kate was glad to see Hal's friendly face, even if he was one of the reasons she had needed to get away from home.

"Hello, Hal." She climbed out of the runabout, ignoring his outstretched hand. Cameron didn't offer to help her. "What are you doing in these parts? I thought you'd be all tied

up at the store." She suffered his kiss with more warmth than she would have had not Cameron Greyville been eyeing them with that infuriating condescension.

She had met Hal Brookwood three years ago and he had been her most persistent admirer. She dated him occasionally. They had met when she went into his bookstore to buy art supplies. Lately, though, she had sensed a more serious note in his attentions and she had been glad of a legitimate excuse to end the light relationship.

"I left things in good hands. Sal Turner is working out even better than I had hoped. Anyway—" he looked at her with heavy significance "—I missed you." There was a spaniel look in his large, dark eyes, and she hated herself for not caring more.

They strolled back toward Gray Lady. Kate felt as if eyes were burning into her back, but when she paused to scoop up her shoes and glanced back, Cameron had already gone. Hal was distinctly put out when she told him he would have to find a room at a motel in Hatteras because her students and her housekeeper were all due today and there just wasn't any more room.

The first couple came just after lunch, and then cars seemed to roll across the old wooden bridge with a paradelike regularity.

By dinnertime everyone had arrived except Annie. Two women from Virginia were veterans of many workshops, and there was an enthusiastic beginner and a gorgeous would-be fashion designer; Stella Wright, who turned full batteries on to the only

male under forty. Kate watched with amusement as they sized each other up.

Tony Palani had roared across the bridge in a red Aston Martin. Dark and good-looking, he soon evaluated the group, setting his gaze speculatively on Stella, as he made himself at home.

They were putting together a meal of cold cuts and salads when Cam appeared in the doorway to tell Kate she had a phone call. He stood there, looking the group over derisively, his eyes finally returning to Stella, who was leaning back in a chair sipping a tall drink while the others fixed the meal.

Kate followed Cam across the clearing between the two houses. "She's not still hanging on, is she?" she called out suddenly.

He waited for her to catch up. "No, there's an operator number for you to call. What makes you think it's a woman?"

"Oh, well, I just assumed it was Iola—my mother. She didn't say?"

"No, she didn't, but, as a matter of fact, it was a woman. I suppose with loverboy on the scene the odds were cut down."

"You never quit, do you? For your information, Hal is not my loverboy," she snapped. "Not that it's any of your business!"

Dotty greeted her with an invitation to dinner.

"Thanks, Dotty, but I've got the whole crew over there improvising something since our cook is late getting here." She waited for the operator to connect her, and then she was speaking to Annie.

"What happened?"

"Oh, Katie, I'm flat on my back in Forsyth Memorial, and I could kick myself up one side and down the other! Here I've gone and let you down, and I was looking forward to this summer so much!" It seemed that Annie had climbed the foldaway ladder to her attic and attempted to bring down a trunk single-handed. She was now undergoing treatment for a slipped disc and would be out of commission for no telling how long.

After assuring her that there was no problem on this end, Kate invited her down to recuperate whenever she felt up to it, but they both knew there was little chance of that. She hung up the phone and turned away dejectedly. How in the world would they manage? Catering to eight people was a full-time job, and Kate could only hope to find someone locally.

As she passed the open doorway of the living room, Dotty asked if it had been bad news.

"'Fraid so. The woman who was to cook and keep house for us won't be able to make it, and my classes start tomorrow. I don't suppose you know of anyone I could hire? I can handle the laundry myself if I have to."

"Maybe your good friend will stay and lend a hand," Cam suggested. "He looked the sort to turn a hand to anything if the rewards were sweet enough."

"I'm afraid that won't be practical," she retorted, turning toward the front door.

"I'll see you out," Cam murmured.

"That won't be necessary, thanks."

"It's as good a time as any to speak to you about your . . . artist friends."

The pause was somehow insulting.

"I came down to the island for peace and quiet, and I'd appreciate it if you'd restrain the freer of the free spirits among them. Let's not have any going and coming at all hours, especially the Latin-lover type with the sports car. Dotty sleeps on this side of the house, and I won't have her disturbed."

"Is that quite all?" Kate said tightly.

"No. While your crew looks harmless enough, keep in mind that this is a pretty conservative area and any wild parties or outdoor life classes—unadorned, that is—won't go unnoticed. You might find yourself asked to move on. A word to the wise."

By this time Kate had come to a slow simmer, and she turned to face him squarely. "Now you listen to me, Mr. Cameron Greyville. I don't know who gave you the right to make snap judgments about people, but you're absolutely wrong about my friends. From what I've seen of *your* taste in companions, you don't have any room to talk!"

"And now who's making judgments, Kate Brown? Just keep them away from this side of the island, do you understand?"

"Oh, but . . ." The protest broke from her before she could stop it. "Do you mean we can't even paint from the knoll or the grove on the other side? The best views of Hatteras are from there and I had planned . . ."

"I'll just bet you had, Miss Brown. I can see the avaricious gleam in those cool, deceptive eyes of yours when you look at my place, but you leased the

old house. Everything else is out of bounds! And, while I think of it, stay out of my boats, too."

"Gladly, Mr. Greyville! I don't even care to breathe the air in your vicinity!"

Kate had gotten over the misfortune of losing Annie's services by the time she reached Gray Lady. Cameron spelled trouble, and she was not sure just how to get around his edict, but no one in her right mind would expect her to keep eight adults shut up indoors for two weeks. She wasn't sure of her legal boundaries, but she would not relinquish any of her rights without a darned good fight. Even the thought of it brought a militant brilliance to her eyes.

THE FIRST class was conducted just over the bridge on Hatteras. Kate was able to size up the widely varied abilities of her students and consider the best approach to teaching them.

Among the middle range were two students who promised to become problems. Stella could probably have achieved exhibiting status but for a bone-deep inertia that spilled over into every aspect of her life. Her two interests, in seeming order of importance, were men and fashion, and that presented her next problem—Tony Palani.

Tony was good-looking in a dark, flashy way, and he made quite sure everyone realized the extent of his—or rather, his father's—wealth. He had immediately set his sights on both Stella and Kate, and he let it be known that he had a great deal to offer his lucky final choice.

As far as painting was concerned, he was an accomplished hobbyist who depended more on his charm than on any real ability, and Kate was afraid that long before his two weeks were up that charm was going to wear terribly thin. Hal was still in residence, having moved into Annie's room, and when he volunteered to help with the chores, Kate had little choice but to take him up on his offer. Actually, she really needed his help, for if teaching alone didn't drain her energies, there was the perpetual fetching of missing equipment and whatever else had been left behind when they trooped out to location.

Of course, they wouldn't have to go all that far if Cameron Greyville weren't such a beast about it. The best parts of the island were going to waste while her little troupe had to trudge a mile or so in the hot sun or pile into cars to go even farther afield.

It only served to underline her feelings about men in general. She found them totally unreasonable. Either they claimed to be wasting away from unrequited love and wanted her to give up her career and devote herself to making them happy or they expected her to hop into bed with them with no commitment on either side. There had already been a few hints of the latter from Tony, and the classes had hardly begun!

Hal departed early Wednesday morning after promising to try to make the trip again over the Fourth of July. Kate nodded in resignation. No matter what she said, he would come anyway. He was convinced that she loved him.

She saw nothing at all of Cameron, but Dotty strolled over one morning to look over the shoulders of the painters, and she volunteered a few comments that indicated familiarity with the medium. She made some ribald comments about Bebe Gonlon's taste in music when a breeze brought the tinny sound across the bridge. "She's hanging on a lot longer than usual. I'm wondering how long Cam's temper is going to hold up," Dotty said.

"We're treated to a free daily concert, with the wind in this direction every day this week," Kate said. It was as close to a complaint as she dared come, and she only hoped Dotty would repeat it where it would do the most good.

On the first day of the second week, Stella was absent from the afternoon class. She had skipped a few of the evening sessions to go out with Tony, but today he was very much in attendance, his good-looking face a little sulky.

By the time dinner was over and they were clearing the tables for the evening critique session, Stella had still not returned. They were well under way with an avid discussion when they heard a car pull up out front. Kate looked up from her demonstration to see Stella and Cam enter.

"We went out to dinner," she announced. "Hope you didn't wait for me."

"No," Kate replied coolly, flipping over the paper she had been demonstrating a masking technique on. "Did you have a nice evening?" She sounded peeved, and she could have kicked herself!

Stella thanked Cameron sweetly for the dinner, then promised to be on the wharf at eight-thirty the next morning.

So much for art lessons, Kate thought sourly. For a girl like Stella Wright, there was no contest between slaving over a hot drawing board and hanging around with an attractive man.

Tony made the most of her defection by concentrating on Kate. His previous attempts at flirtation had been diluted between the two of them, but now she had to put him in his place several times a day.

It was the next to last night, and the evening critique had given way to a flurry of matting and hanging. Kate had posted several notices in Hatteras for their one-day exhibit. It was a windup of the session, and she planned it mainly for the fun of seeing public reaction to their work.

Exhausted after a day of trying to impart enough to the students to keep them going on their own, Kate had wandered out to the bridge to watch the stars reflected in the ripples below.

"Stargazing?" Tony asked from behind her.

Kate turned and gazed at him warily. "No, just needing a few minutes alone. I run out of steam about this time every day."

"It does get to be a bit much, doesn't it?" he agreed, leaning over the rail beside her. "Now, if we were to do it all over again, I'd insist on choosing my roommate." He nudged her shoulder and picked up one of her hands, playing idly with her fingers before she snatched them away.

"Not now, Tony, please. I'm not in the mood for one of your verbal passes." She moved away.

"Then we'll move on to the action," he said, snaking an arm around her and pulling her against him, overcoming her resistance with a surprisingly wiry strength. When he crushed her arms against his chest and buried his face in her throat, she raged, "Tony, stop it!"

"Come on, honey, don't be like that. You haven't had any loving since Brookwood left, and you must be as hungry as I am."

She kicked at him and lost her balance. He took advantage of that to cover her mouth with his hot, eager lips. Finally, she decided to cool his ardor by remaining impassive.

But the kiss went on and on, and she felt her stomach churning. There was nothing more repulsive than being mauled by someone she didn't care for, and Tony Palani had rapidly descended to someone she actively despised. She was still standing frozen in his embrace when the headlights swept around the curve to the bridge approach. Tony's face left hers as the gunmetal Mercedes passed within a foot of where they were standing.

Cameron was at the wheel, his face a sneering mask, and silhouetted beside him was Stella Wright.

THE DAY of the open house began with showers and cleared just before lunch. They had chipped in and bought the makings for punch, popped gallons of popcorn and cubed pounds of cheese to go with the assortment of crackers.

The paintings were only matted, but they looked good. By careful selection, it had been possible to include several from each student, and everyone was in a cheerful mood.

Everyone except Tony, that was. He was still sulking after having struck out the night before.

More guests showed up than Kate had dared hope, and there were even a few sales to brighten spirits. At about four-thirty, she sensed attention pull away from the exhibit and the refreshment table, and she leaned over to see Cameron at the front door, his hand on Dotty's shoulder.

Dotty hurried over and spoke to several of the students, but Cameron remained aloof. Kate wondered in spite of herself how such a mean, hateful soul could be housed in such a magnificent body.

"It's delightful, Kate," Dotty exclaimed, coming over with a cup of punch in her bejeweled hand. "The show, I mean, although this punch isn't half-bad. What is it, anyway?"

"Nothing you'd ever recognize, Dotty."

They laughed together. Dotty expressed an interest in one of the watercolors of Bay Oaks, and then Stella and Tony converged on them from opposite sides of the room. Tony was under the influence of something more than innocent punch. Kate braced herself for unpleasantness.

"Hello, Dotty," Stella drawled. "Haven't seen you around lately."

"No, but then, I try to stay out of the way whenever Cam has a heavy load of work to get done," Dotty an-

swered smoothly, her small eyes snapping.

Stella shrugged off the innuendo, and sniffed when Tony draped an arm across Kate's shoulder. "Did I tell you, Stella, that I've decided to stay over for the next session?"

Kate gasped. "But you can't. It's all filled!"

"Oh, no, it's not. Did I forget to give you the message?" He looked at her in mock consternation. "Sorry, sweetheart. Greyville told me but I clean forgot. The kid from Richmond won't be coming. He had to have an emergency appendectomy, and that's a refundable cause for dropping out, so I've decided to do you a favor and stay on," he said with a sickening leer.

Kate would have given twice the tuition just to wipe that look off his face. She was determined to have it out with him, but not here in front of an all-too-avid audience. She couldn't help but be aware of the other two women as she stood there in Tony's casual-appearing embrace. Stella looked knowingly amused and while Dotty looked sympathetic enough, she was unable to keep that slightly wicked look of speculation from her eyes.

Only Cameron's reaction was hidden from her, and she would not turn to face him. She fancied she could feel the heat emanating from his body behind her and so was doubly shocked to hear the front screen door slam and see him stride past the window on his way back to Bay Oaks.

*

TRUE TO HIS threat, Tony stayed on, and Kate could come up with no grounds for turning him away. She did need the money, for even though Annie's salary was saved, she had not counted on the high cost of the meals.

Tony's staying also meant that she did not have the two-day respite between sessions. Everyone was packed and gone by nine on Saturday morning. She had counted on having a quiet little break, but Tony insisted on taking her sight-seeing, and she found herself agreeing weakly. Maybe she was more tired than she thought.

They ate in one of the better restaurants on Saturday night, after dropping off a huge load of laundry, and Kate had to admit it was nice to enjoy a meal she hadn't prepared. They had reached the dessert stage when Cameron and Dotty walked in. Dotty led her grandson across the room to their waterfront table, ignoring Tony's frown as she greeted Kate warmly.

"Won't you join us?" Tony asked reluctantly.

"Oh, but you're just finishing," Dotty protested.

"Nonsense," Cameron insisted, drawing up two more chairs. "I'm sure they'll enjoy another coffee, and we'll have the advantage of a good table." He looked lean and handsome and somehow pleased with himself, and it occurred to Kate that such a man could be infinitely dangerous.

They parted finally, with the excuse of having to collect the laundry plus a few groceries, and it did not occur to Kate until they were on their way back

to Coranoke that tonight she would be alone in the house with Tony. She felt suddenly vulnerable, especially since Tony's attitude had deteriorated since dinner.

They pulled up in front of the house. "I'll get the laundry and you can carry the groceries," she said.

"Are you asking or telling?"

"I'm asking, but it wouldn't hurt you to offer. You certainly consume your share of them." Not very gracious, but she couldn't help it.

"Seeing as how I'm paying through the nose for it, you shouldn't complain."

"You know, Tony, you're really not a very nice person, are you?"

"Once you get to know me better, you're going to love me," he told her with a crooked smile. He reached for her, but her hand was on the door latch.

"You're disgusting! I think you'd better take off, Tony. You haven't paid for the second term, and I've found it necessary to limit the enrollment." She was out of the car and reaching for the boxes in the back when he caught her, and she slapped out at him angrily. "Tony, behave yourself!"

He had come around the car so swiftly that he caught her by surprise, his arms circling her waist from behind. She tried kicking, but it didn't work.

"Calm down, sweetheart. You know you've been counting the hours today just like I have." He lifted her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. She swung at him just as the headlights appeared, blinding them for a instant.

"Oh, good Lord, Tony, am I going to have to call the sheriff?" she exploded angrily.

"What would you charge me with? I haven't done anything you haven't been inviting me to do, have I?"

"You're an utter swine!" she yelled at him, jerking from his grasp. She turned and began to run, not caring about the laundry, the groceries or anything except getting away from those clutching hands. Unfortunately, he put out a foot, and she went sprawling headlong into the sand.

"They all fall for me sooner or later," Tony quipped, leaning over to lift her up, but she kicked out at him again.

"Go away, will you? Just leave me alone!" Tears of pure rage burned her eyes.

"You heard what she said. Get!" came a familiar gravelly baritone, and Kate clenched her fists. Was it inevitable that Cam should witness every mortifying encounter she had with Tony?

She felt herself being lifted up from under her arms and then Cameron was inquiring with a rough tenderness if she were all right.

"Fine. What did you expect?" Embarrassment made her sound shrewish.

Cameron's hands dropped from her shoulders. "If I'd expected a little common politeness I'd have been damned disappointed! Go on in to your little friend," he sneered, and turned to go.

"Wait. I'm sorry." She was struggling to keep her voice level. "I'm really sorry. And—and I do thank you,

Mr. Greyville. Of course, I could have handled the situation, but even so—"

"Handled the situation? If you had even a grain of sense, you'd never have put yourself in that position in the first place."

"Thank you for those words of wisdom, Mr. Greyville," she blurted. "Just think, if the whole world knew what you know, no one would ever get themselves in trouble again."

"You and that mob of yours. Just tell them to keep away from my side of the island." He was towering over her again, and she thrust her chin out belligerently.

"You didn't object to one of them," she told him with mock sweetness. "I noticed that as soon as your little top-ten tootsie moved out, you filled the vacancy with Stella Wright. Too bad she had to leave, too."

"Too bad is right. At least she knew how to behave like a woman instead of a frustrated, bad-tempered shrew who—"

Kate didn't allow him to finish. She swung wildly, and Cameron stood with mocking insolence and took the blow squarely on the cheek. Then he reached out and jerked her against him with a punishing force as his mouth came down on her outraged protest. She seethed as his hands began to move over her body with an insulting thoroughness, but as the kiss changed into something less aggressive and more subtly seductive, she found her anger draining away. It was then that his kiss broke the barrier of her determination and invaded the warm, soft depths of her.

By the time he had finished, Kate was shaking, and he put her away from him abruptly, retaining the grip on her shoulders before turning her in the direction of Bay Oaks. "Go and tell Dotty to pour you a stiff drink," he ordered peremptorily.

"I can't do that. The groceries . . . Tony—I don't even know where he is."

"I'll take care of all that. Now go and do as I said."

CAMERON returned some twenty minutes later and, without speaking to either of the two women, poured himself a stiff drink and tossed it back. Then he poured another and sat down. Only then did he look at Kate. "You're welcome to stay the night if you'd care to, but Palani won't be bothering you anymore."

Kate was stunned to realize that she wanted nothing so much as to snuggle into the comfort of this rambling house and forget all about her classes, forget everything except the unqualified friendliness of the old woman and the strength that emanated from Cameron Greyville.

Feeling oddly more threatened now, she made herself stand. "In that case, I can only thank you, but I'll go along now. He . . . it was just that Tony caught me off guard," she prevaricated. "Thank you again," she blurted, hurrying to the door before either of them could rise.

Tony's car was gone and so were his belongings. In the kitchen the boxes were stacked neatly on the table.

The next morning Kate was awakened by a sound that was all mixed up with a dream and she lay there, blink-

ing awake, as the door opened. Cameron Greyville stood there.

"Are you absolutely insane?" she demanded, sitting up in her thin white nightgown, her dark brown hair tumbling over her tanned shoulders.

"I knocked, but when there was no answer, I was afraid—well, I can see that you're all right now."

"Get out of here!"

"I want to speak to you, before Dotty gets here."

"Look, have you any idea what time it is?"

"Pipe down!" He crossed the room to sit at the foot of her bed. Kate drew the cotton bedspread up under her chin.

"You play a marvelous outraged virgin, my dear, but that's not what I've got on my mind at the moment." His eyes roamed her form clearly outlined beneath the light covers. "Dotty has a bee in her bonnet about taking your course. With Palani gone, there's a vacancy."

"So?" she demanded suspiciously.

"So . . . let her come, and don't be too critical of her efforts. I want her to enjoy herself without worrying too much about coming up to your standards, if you have any."

"Mr. Greyville, I *do* have standards, and I'm sure Dotty will fit comfortably in the class. I happen to like *her* very much."

"The inference being that you find her grandson less palatable," he jeered.

"Exactly."

"You know, Miss Brown, I find it remarkable that two males in the past two weeks have been willing to risk

your thorns in search of any possible nectar," he mused.

"My love life, Mr. Greyville, is my own affair," Kate retorted. "For your information, I find men remarkably easy to do without altogether. They're a bunch of pompous, opinionated, arrogant—"

"Don't choke on your own wrath, Kate, darling. I suspect you're throwing out a Freudian challenge."

"Get out!" she raged.

"If I get too bored this summer, I might even take you up on it," he promised, closing the door behind himself.

THE SECOND session began smoothly with a more or less harmonious group. It was a younger group, on the whole, with a social worker, a kindergarten teacher, two housewives, a retired minister and two jaded-looking men who told her they were on sabbatical in order to "find themselves." Dotty was a delight to have. An added bonus was her permission to use the land nearer the other house.

By the second day, the group had settled down to a good, working pace, and Kate had resigned herself to doing most of the chores, as usual.

On a morning when the thermometer threatened to blow its top, she herded her charges to the other side of Bay Oaks to the shady grove of trees.

They were trudging back for lunch when Cam called to her from the house. "Call came for you half an hour ago," he told her.

"Why didn't you call me? I wasn't that far away," she snapped. The heat was making her short-tempered.

"Out of sorts, aren't we?" he murmured maddeningly, looking cool and unfairly handsome behind the screen door.

Kate felt the trickle of perspiration down her back and she felt grubby and mean and unattractive and ridiculously close to tears.

"Don't you want your message?"

"Oh. Well, tell me, then."

He opened the door and she found herself drawn into the inviting coolness of the hallway.

"Woman by the name of Lola—your mother, I believe—said to tell you that France has tossed her job and that they're coming to spend the rest of the summer at the beach with you. You're to expect them sometime after dark."

"Tonight? Are you sure? They couldn't. I told her—" She broke off in dismay.

"Bad news? You don't want them? A little too late for that, I'm afraid, but really, Kate, your mother sounded like a delightful person to me. Still, you're the best judge of that, I guess." He finished off a drink and asked if she'd like something cool. "You look as if you could use it," he said.

"Thanks," she muttered, "but I've got to fix lunch for my group."

"Let them fend for themselves for once. You can't wet-nurse a bunch of adults all day and be effective as a teacher. Come on. There's shrimp salad, and I'll open you a beer to go with it."

She allowed herself to go along with the tide, and when he pointed her toward the bathroom with a terse order to wash up, she obeyed with unnatural meekness.

Eileen Greer, the daily, whom Kate had seen several times in the grocery store at Hatteras, smiled at her when she emerged, and directed her to the porch where Cameron and Dotty waited.

"I feel guilty," she admitted, accepting the chair Cameron offered. "They're over there at Gray Lady making do with cold cuts while I'm here being served a feast."

"Gray Lady?" Cameron's thick brows lifted.

"Oh, it's just a silly name I gave the house when I first got here. It looked so much like a woman I know. You know how things sometimes make you think of people."

She accepted a serving of delicious-looking shrimp salad and slices of melon, and they all did justice to Eileen's talents in the kitchen. Dotty managed to put away an amazing amount, considering her size and the fact that she interrupted every other bite to remark on something.

"And now," Kate said finally, "if I may use your phone, I'd better see if I can line up some accommodations for my improvident family."

"I wouldn't think of it, Katie," Dotty said.

Kate was taken slightly aback. "Well, of course there's a pay phone...."

"What my grandmother means, Kate, is that we'd be delighted to have them stay here," Cameron said. "There's plenty of room."

"Oh, that's out of the question," Kate protested, but she was no match for the Greyvilles.

KATE MADE it through the rest of the session by filling every hour as full of activity as possible. If she had allowed herself time to think, she might have sat down and wept.

Her family, true to form, had arrived in style. France had blown her severance pay, plus the last of Iola's quarterly check, on a trade-in. The old Ford might not have made the trip, but the disreputable Spitfire was the height of insanity. Her mother—that dreamy, impractical divorcée who at the age of forty-nine wore floating chiffon to do her lick-and-a-promise housework and used an injured knee shamelessly when the occasion arose to get all sorts of preferential treatment—traveling across the state in an open sports car with a stagestruck all-but-teenager! But they had settled into Bay Oaks with the ease of old family friends.

It was no surprise that Dotty and Iola hit it off at once, for they were both complete originals, but to see France hanging on to Cameron's every word was a bit much. Of course, he fell for it hook, line and sinker. Few males could resist France's voluptuous little figure, contrasting, as it did, with her blond curls and melting chocolate eyes.

"I'M GOING TO run into the village to get some milk," Kate said abruptly on the Saturday evening when her class had left. She had dined at Bay Oaks at Dotty's insistence, largely ignored while the two women talked of common interests and France played up to Cameron.

"Hmm? What's that, dear?" Iola murmured.

"If you're going into the village, I'll take you," Cameron remarked, laying aside his newspaper.

"Why don't we go, Cam? We could take my car with the top down and Kate wouldn't have to bother," France pleaded.

"Read that article on the money market while I'm gone, pet, and then you'll understand what I was getting at, hmm? Ready, Kate?"

They were outside before Kate could come up with an excuse not to accompany him, and he steered her over to the gunmetal Mercedes. Once seated, she tucked her apple green skirt closely around her as if it might offer some protection from him.

He climbed in but didn't close the door immediately. Instead he turned to study her face intently in the dim interior light.

"Aren't you afraid of drawing mosquitoes?" she snapped.

"You're more afraid of the light than you are of the darkness? I wonder why?" he persisted in a soft tone of voice.

He shut the door and then his hands were close over her shoulders. Before she could do more than utter an outraged protest, his mouth closed over her own and he hauled her across the console so that she fell awkwardly against his unyielding body. She remained absolutely still while his kiss threatened to rip the very soul out of her. When he pulled his mouth away to curse softly, "Kiss me, damn you," she felt a tiny thrill of defiance. When his fingertips lingered on the racing pulse at the base of her throat before dropping to her breasts, she crumpled.

When she felt the inflaming touch of his thumbs as they brushed the aroused nubs of her nipples, she groaned and opened her mouth to his plundering tongue. Overwhelmed at her own response, she pushed against his chest, then shook her head frantically in rejection of her own frightening desires.

"What's the matter?" he murmured. "Don't you like what we can do to each other?"

She struggled away from him. "Leave me alone!" she demanded. "Let me go!"

"Quit acting like an outraged virgin, Kate," he provoked, his hand finding her breast again with unerring accuracy. He cupped the throbbing roundness with one determined hand as he forced her to face him once more.

"Why didn't you bring my sister if this was all you were thinking about? She's obviously besotted with you!"

"Now, is that any way for a woman your age to look after her younger sister's welfare?"

His hand was having an irresistible effect on her aching breast, and his warm breath played on her overheated face. Kate could hear the sound of her own blood as it rushed like a tidal wave through her veins. "D-don't make fun of me, Cameron. I'm not in your league and we b-both know it," she whispered.

"And what is my league?"

"Stop it!" The words were torn from her, and she heard the tears in her own voice even before she felt the cool wetness on her cheeks. She sat rigidly in the darkness, while the man beside her played on her traitorous body like a virtuoso, and she was unable to stop

him even when her nerves screamed at her that she was in danger. That the danger was only half-understood made it all the more frightening, and she shut her mind to the stunning pleasure his skilled, persuasive touch was bringing her.

"Katie, Katie, why can't you relax and just let nature take its course? You want me and we both know it, so why pretend?" His mouth came closer and he insinuated the soft little words against her stiff lips with a light touch. Then, with his mouth still hovering a breath away, he taunted, "Why not, Katie? Why not?"

Because I love you, you fool, she screamed silently, and it would kill me to be another in your lineup of momentary distractions!

"I hate you, Cameron Greyville!" she heard herself saying in a voice she hardly recognized. "I hate you for making me feel this way," she whispered in a choked sound that tore through the brittle tension.

"No, you don't, Kate," he replied tiredly, moving away from her. "But you've left it too long now, I'm afraid. You'll never be more than half a woman, and soon that half will grow so embittered that you won't even be able to smile at a man without cracking your shell." He started the engine. "And to think I believed you were only waiting for some poor fool to awaken you. There aren't any Prince Charmings anymore, Kate. It's an extinct species, I'm afraid. So go on back to sleep in your castle and let the briars grow up around it."

Before she could get her breathing under control, they were at the store.

"Shall I get your milk?" he asked in a clipped tone.

"Please," she replied huskily. "A gallon, please."

He slammed the door. Kate sat there in the neon-fractured darkness, watching the summer people with huge, unseeing eyes.

Cameron dropped her off at her own place, and she let herself in with leaden motions. By the time she was ready for bed, her mind was safely encapsulated within the narrow confines she allowed it, ticking off items against the arrival of tomorrow's class.

A WEEK passed during which she hardly saw her family. Cameron left the island each night soon after dark. Sometimes he was alone and sometimes France was with him; once, he took all three women in his household. Kate watched them disappear over the bridge with a bitter longing in her eyes before she turned to the woman beside her and began explaining how to paint convincing reflections.

She continued to use the shady grove on the other side of the Greyville house. If Cameron wanted to rescind permission, then he would have to tell her himself. She had spoken to him only once since that disastrous night. He brought over a letter that had been put in his own box at the post office by mistake and was as impersonal as if she were a transient renter on his property.

Which was nothing less than the truth.

ON THE NEXT to last day of the session, she sent her group on to the house for lunch and wandered down to the beach beyond the shady grove.

Impulsively she turned and began to wade out into the shallow water. She wore old sneakers with white shorts and T-shirt, and the warm water crept over her ankles, her calves and up to her knees. It occurred to her that she would enjoy a trip to the ocean and a brisk, refreshing dip in the Atlantic. As long as she had been here, she had yet to swim in the ocean. It just hadn't occurred to her to take off an afternoon and go swimming. There had been no one to go with her, and she didn't relish going alone.

She was wading back toward the shore, her eyes on the water as she tried to avoid submerged hazards. Not until she was in ankle-deep water did she dare to look up again, and when she did she halted, her heart leaping painfully.

"I wondered if you were trying to wade all the way to Engelhard," Cam remarked. He was standing at the edge of the water, his legs braced apart—long, tightly muscled limbs whose tan was modified by the coat of crisp, dark hairs—and his hands planted on his hips above low-riding white shorts. There was something so masculine about him that Kate was embarrassed at her own reaction. As a result, when she spoke, her words sounded sharper than she intended.

"What do you want?" she asked ungraciously.

He held out a hand. "Pax," he said, and she was compelled to wade closer until she touched her reluctant palm to

his. "I've brought an invitation to lunch. When we didn't see you go back to Gray Lady, it occurred to me that you might be needing a break. You're going at it too hard and heavy, Kate. Why don't you readjust your schedule so that you'll have more time to yourself?"

She bristled, but when she would have withdrawn her hand, he gripped it more tightly. "I can't shortchange my students, Cameron. They're paying for so many hours a day and they'll get it."

"But do you have to throw yourself into it quite so wholeheartedly? Nobody can put out and put out indefinitely without either breaking or having the quality compromised."

"What would you know about teaching art?" she demanded fiercely, and this time she succeeded in pulling her hand away.

"Nothing, but, Kate, what I've said goes for any enterprise. You're driving yourself too hard, and you're getting as gaunt as a scarecrow. Not even that lovely tan can cover up the shadows under your eyes. You look haunted, Katie." His voice took on a tender note that threatened to undermine her, and she answered it with a rueful smile.

"All right, you've made your point. I'm deteriorating badly. So I'll consider a different schedule, but only because it just occurred to me that I want to go swimming at least once while I'm here—lower myself under a cold wave and stay there until the sun goes down."

"I'll take you one day next week, if you like. Now, how about lunch with your family and Dotty? Before you re-

fuse—" he grinned. "—I'll be busy in my study, so it will be strictly a hen party. I'm afraid your mother thinks you've been neglecting her lately."

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ON SATURDAY morning, before the arrival of the next group, Cameron sent word by Dotty that he was going surf fishing and wanted to take Kate along. "You'll love it," she declared. "I went with him once on one of his nighttime expeditions and it's another world."

What the devil—why not? The summer was already half over and there were so many things she hadn't done. Unfortunately, she *had* done the one thing she shouldn't—fall in love with a man who considered her some sort of joke. That was enough to insure that she look elsewhere for her next workshop location.

But while she was here, she may as well try it all. So, according to Cam's instructions, she wore shorts and took along a jacket. When she climbed into the front seat, she found a very disgruntled France glowering at her from the back.

"What are Iola and Dotty doing tonight?" she asked.

"Going to a meeting of some sort, I believe," Cam told her. Trust Iola to get involved in local activities on a summer visit.

They parked at the end of a gravel road and trudged over the high, soft dune. The soft, damp wind held tantalizing hints of exotic shores thousands of miles away. The moon was three-quarters full and it played tag with dark, silver-edged clouds, il-

luminating the breakers in a beautiful, mysterious way.

"It's absolutely magic," Kate said, turning impulsively to where Cam was rigging tackle onto three rods in sand spikes.

"Holding a rod and reel gives you an excuse to spend time enjoying it without feeling like a damned fool." He smiled.

"Well, I can think of better things to do, but under the circumstances..." France let her voice trail off.

"Done any fishing before?" Cameron asked Kate as he baited her double rig with shrimp.

"Not much. Lake fishing, mostly."

While he tended to France, throwing out her line for her, Kate edged as close to the creaming breakers as she dared and let fly. She backlashed, cursed softly, and backed up, untangling as she went, finally cheating and reeling in the line over the worst tangle. Then she waded out and cast again. It might not go far, but since she couldn't see, what difference did it make?

"I'm going back to the car. You two can stay here drowning in shrimp as long as you want, but my skin's tender, and something's about to eat me up!" France declared loudly.

"I haven't felt a thing, have you, Kate?" Cam asked, taking France's rod.

"Not a thing. Guess I'm not very sensitive," she replied, pushing away an uncharitable feeling of glee. After all, France *did* have a lighter complexion.

"We'll be back before long. Nothing seems to be biting tonight—at least

underwater. Play the radio or tape, if you'd like." Cam tossed her the keys.

After a while, a snatch of music drifted over to the surf, and Kate hummed along with a half-forgotten song about never loving again. Cam appeared at her side, reeling in to check his bait.

"Bored?" he asked.

"Nope. I don't think I've ever been bored in my life, and— Cam!" she screamed. "Something's happening!"

"Well, hang on, don't panic. I checked your drag and it's fine. Reel him in."

"But, Cam, he's reeling *me* in! Take it—you do it!" she cried, trying to hand off her rod to Cam, but he backed away, putting his own rod into a sand spike in order to coach her along. But she was getting deeper and deeper into the surf, the water breaking about her hips. Cam was right behind her.

"You've got plenty of line, Kate, so let him run."

"But that's just it," she wailed. "I had a backlash and I reeled in over it and... Oh, no!"

What happened then was never quite clear. There was a loud snap and her foot slid down an embankment. The next thing she knew, she was being pummeled and rolled by thundering tons of water. It only occurred to her much later that her life had not flashed before her eyes; the only thing she could think of was Cam.

And then she was being pulled apart, her arm grasped and held, and she felt herself being dragged back up onto the hard-packed sand, flung down on her face and pounded. She never quite lost

consciousness, but she was beyond telling Cam that her ribs were fragile and that she had been scraped over every inch of her body, so that when he turned her and began to breathe into her mouth, she was more aware of gravel digging into her skin than she was of his mouth on hers.

The next few hours were a kaleidoscopic nightmare. She had insisted on walking into the house on her own two feet so as not to alarm Iola and Dotty, but when France reported the Spitfire still out, Cameron scooped Kate up in his arms, took the steps as if she weighed no more than a child, and laid her on top of an elegant brown spread on a king-size bed.

"I'll ruin it. I'm all wet and sandy. And you should have left me at my own place. Cam, please, won't you..."

"Please, won't you shut up? France, fetch your sister something to put on."

"Which room is hers?" France had yet to spend more than five minutes at Gray Lady. Cam muttered an inelegant phrase and ordered her to look after things until he got back.

"Are you really hurt bad, Katie?" France asked.

"Of course not; silly," Kate croaked. "I just got the wind knocked out of me and swallowed gallons of sand and salt water. Just let me lie here for a few minutes, and then I'll go home. Look, France—don't tell Iola, all right?" Kate coughed and asked for a tissue. "Lord, I feel awful. I must look terrible."

"You do," France told her. She touched Kate's hair and then brushed her hand on the seat of her shorts. "Well, if there's nothing else I can do

for you, I'd like to get a bath and put lotion on my bites."

"You ought to know better than to wear so much perfume. It attracts them," Kate said, wishing her sister would leave.

"Maybe I'll get used to them after a while. They say if you stay down here long enough you don't even notice them," France said.

"How long are you planning to stay?" Kate implored.

"Honestly, you can't stand it, can you?" France said, her dark eyes flashing. "You weren't fool enough to think you had a chance with Cam, were you? The only man who ever looked at you twice was that stodgy old Hal Brookwood. I'm Cam's guest and you're just his tenant, so if anybody leaves, it won't be me!"

With an exasperated sound, Kate sat up and swung her feet to the floor. Her head rocked and she lifted a hand to her forehead. "Look, France, this is obviously a man's room—Cam's, I guess—and if he put me in here, it means that the other rooms are all filled up, and it's just not fair for you and Iola to move in on somebody you don't even know and stay the whole summer long. Don't you realize that they might have other friends who'd like to drop in for a week or so? There's no room!"

France shrugged her beautifully formed shoulders. "Look, it's too late to cry over spilled milk now. Cam and I *did* meet and, what's more, we like each other—like each other a good deal, as a matter of fact. We have an understanding, Cam and I. He'll do whatever I want, and if you're nice to

me, then I might...I just *might* get you a rent reduction." Her smile was in no way reflected in her innocent-looking eyes.

Kate was across the floor in less time than it took to consider the action. She shook the younger girl, although her own strength was only up to a token effort. "Now you listen to me, Frances Brown. If you dare do anything stupid and get yourself in trouble, you'll have me to answer to, not Iola! You've caused her enough grief in the past, and this time—you behave yourself or you'll have me to deal with!"

"Stop it, you hateful old thing!"

France's cry came just as the bedroom door opened to admit Cam, a light green nightgown draped over one arm and a glass of amber liquid in his hand. France let out a wail and launched herself at him, tears flowing down her becomingly flushed cheeks. "Cam, make her stop it. She's being perfectly dreadful to me!" She buried her face in his chest, causing the drink to slosh alarmingly.

"What's been going on here?" he asked mildly, resisting the younger girl's efforts to pull his ear down to her mouth as she whispered at him.

"She says she doesn't want us here. She says I have to go and take Iola with me, and she's just saying that because she's jealous. She's always been jealous of my beauty, Cam, ever since I was a little girl, and now she wants to get rid of me and I don't want to go. Please say you won't send me back to that hateful old job where I melt because they're too cheap to use the air conditioner."

A bubble of mirth arose in Kate's throat and she dropped down onto the bed again as laughter overcame her. Her head was splitting, her throat was raw, but it was so funny, such bad theater, that she howled. And then the laughter changed to something else, and her face crumpled, and she sat there with her hands hanging limply at her sides and cried openly.

There was a flurry of movement seen dimly through shimmering eyes and then she was lifted up and cradled against a warm, hard wall that rocked with the rhythm of a heartbeat. "Hush, Katie," Cam murmured. "Hush now, it's not important."

The sobs slowed and finally ceased, and she sniffed, then hiccuped. "Oh, Lordy, once I start these, it takes forever to get rid of them," she wailed.

"Well, you've already had your scare, so I'll have to try my own favorite remedy on you."

"What's that?" she sniffed weakly, looking up at him. He was leaning against the headboard and holding her against him, her sandy, wet hair spread out over his shoulder. She knew the answer to her question as his mouth closed over her own and she hiccuped once and then her arms wound around his neck and she gave herself up to the powerful medicine of his lovemaking. And when she felt his hands at her buttons, she could only shrug and help him ease the garment from her shoulders. Her shorts came next, and he eased them down over her legs without ever breaking contact with her throat, and his downward trail of kisses.

"It'll probably take a fish scaler to get all the gravel off your skin," he murmured, scratching lightly against her midriff to loosen the tiny grains. He held her breast and picked the small shells off deliberately and Kate turned away from his overpowering nearness.

"You shouldn't be here," she protested weakly. "You shouldn't see me this way."

"Your inhibitions are showing, Katie darling," Cameron whispered, trailing the backs of his fingers down her thigh, making her acutely aware that she wore only a pair of nylon pants and a lacy bra.

He lowered his face to her throat again, finding all the most sensitive places and between tiny, nibbling kisses, Cameron teased her, telling her that her hair looked like seaweed, that there were few openings for mermaids this season, but even though his words were light, she could sense the rapidly increasing tension in his own body and his amber eyes were strangely dark and intense. He made no attempt to hide the state of his arousal, and when he spoke, his words were torn between deep gasping breaths and shaken with the pounding of his heart. He licked her throat.

"Hmm, salty—sandy, too," he whispered, "but delicious." His hands moved again and she was released from the constraint of her bra and it felt so free, so fine, when his lips moved to the gentle hills of her breasts and conquered them, teasing the straining tips with his tongue.

"Ahh, Cam, please," she groaned, hardly knowing what she was pleading for.

"Kate, darling, I must have you." He uttered the words in a voice that was hardly recognizable as he fumbled with his own clothing.

Borne along too far, too fast on the tidal wave of passion, Kate heard nothing until she felt Cam stiffen and draw away slightly, and then she heard the front door slam and Dotty's voice calling out to see where everyone was.

With a half-stifled cry of pure frustration, he lifted himself from her. "Kate, I'm sorry. I had no intention of allowing things to get out of hand."

Her very nerves screaming, she forced herself to reply flippantly, "Oh, that's all right. At least my hiccups are cured. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to put on my clothes and get out of here."

All her senses unnaturally alert now, she could hear France's voice and Dotty's and Iola's, and she knew it would be only moments before the invasion. "Please," she entreated.

"Kate, let me help you into the bath. You need to wash that sand and salt off you." He half-lifted her from the bed and she jerked her arms away from him.

"You've helped me quite enough. What did you do with my shorts?" She pulled the corner of the bedspread over her as a protective shawl, for all she wore now were her damp nylon panties. "And stop staring at me like that. It's not the first time I've been kissed, believe it or not!"

"Stop trying to be so tough, Kate. We'll continue with this another time."

"Oh, no, we won't!"

When Iola called nervously through the door, he told her to come on in:

"She's shocked and she took a pounding, but basically she's all right," he told the anxious woman.

Kate still had a part of the bedspread caught up around her bare shoulders, the rest of it trailing across the bed. "It's all right, Mama," she said, "I just got in over my head, that's all." In more ways than one, she added silently.

IN SPITE OF A strong compulsion to return to Gray Lady and her own stark little bedroom, Kate was glad to fall into Cam's king-size bed after soaking away part of her aches and pains. She awakened the next morning to find herself stiff and headachy, but infinitely better than she had been.

When awareness of her emotional ordeal began to surface above her physical complaints, she did her best to ignore it, but there was no avoiding the knowledge that Cam had come very close to seducing her last night—with her full cooperation. Now, to her utter shame, she regretted the interruption. Just a few more minutes and she would have known what it was like to be made love to by a man who had come to mean more to her than any living creature.

It was lust, not love, she reminded herself, but all the same...

Snap out of it, you silly old fool! she whispered fiercely to herself. He saved your neck once last night, but Dotty and Iola saved it the second time. That would have been a fine state of affairs—you in bed with the man who, for all you know, might end up your brother-in-law!

Dotty came up with a dress for her to put on and reported no sign of any students so far, and, after dressing, Kate descended the stairs with a slow, awkward gait.

Cameron emerged from his study as she reached the bottom step, and his tawny eyes missed nothing. "All better now?" he asked, his searching look seeming to signify more than just her physical well-being.

"Fine and dandy," she replied brightly.

"If you have a minute, I want to talk to you about canceling out on this session." He reached for her arm and she jerked it away.

"You what?"

"You heard me. You're in no condition to teach, Kate, but you insist on driving yourself. You can call them now and probably reach most of them before they set out, and if you refund the fees, they'll sign on elsewhere and everyone will be a lot better off."

"Well, thanks a lot. That's a real vote of confidence, Mr. Greyville. You may be my landlord, but that's *all* you are! Nowhere in my lease does it say that you can give me orders on how to conduct my business." She came down the last step and brushed past him. "Thanks for the use of the bed," she said over her shoulder as she stalked off into the blinding, relentless sun.

THE STUDENTS came on schedule, a mixed group again, but Kate didn't doubt her ability to mold them into a working unit. She did reschedule her afternoon class to a later hour, and since that made the nightly critique and demonstration session late, she made

it peer critique instead, leaving her free to relax while her students discussed one another's work.

On the last day of classes she took her gang to the grassy stretch alongside the wharf. She had seen Cam's car drive off soon after class began and had not noticed it return, and she thought it might be a good time to drop in and see if Iola and France wanted to go to Manteo and Nags Head with her tomorrow. Dotty, too, if she was interested.

Slinging her gear into the canvas holdall, she set out, head down, face shaded by the brim of her straw hat. She could hear Dotty's tuneless whistling from the garden, and from an open window upstairs came the sound of France's radio.

She rounded the corner, swooping to inhale the fragrance of a window box of nasturtiums and phlox, and straightened to see a tangle of bare legs dangling from the porch hammock.

"Were you looking for me, Kate?" Cam asked laconically.

Another head popped up at that and she found herself staring back at Bebe Gonlon's petulant prettiness.

"Are you still here?" Bebe demanded rudely.

"Are you back again?" Kate said, just as rudely.

Cameron threw back his head and let loose a rich chuckle; pushing the red-gold blonde away. "Ladies, ladies, there's room enough in the hammock for both of you. Care to climb aboard, Kate?"

"I was looking for Iola. Don't let me interrupt anything," she insisted, turning to leave.

"Kate?" The one word, spoken softly, stopped her in her tracks and she turned to see a look on Cam's face that baffled her completely. It was almost as if he had reached some conclusion that satisfied him immensely and had just now had it confirmed.

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HAVING arranged to take France and Iola to Manteo and Nags Head to do the galleries and browse the shops, Kate was outside rinsing the salt from her windshield before the sun had even cleared away the morning haze. She heard the front door at Bay Oaks and looked up in time to see Cameron, a bag in each hand, standing on the porch with four women.

Iola waved and then France, with a hesitant look at Bebe, threw her arms around Cameron's neck and whispered something in his ear—or at least it appeared that way to Kate.

She closed her eyes for just a moment. Oh, how it hurt, in spite of all her fine resolutions to act her age, to resign herself to having no part in Cam's life, and smile when it killed her to watch him treating France and even Bebe with the casual affection she coveted so much. Not that that was all she wanted from him, but it still looked good from where she stood on the outside looking in.

Kate dragged them, unwilling, through the galleries, and they insisted on spending equal time in the shops. It was when they were on the way home that Iola mentioned the extension course she had signed up for at the high school. Kate turned to her in dismay. "What on earth for, Iola?

Those things last at least six weeks, don't they? Good Lord, I thought you were only here for a short visit." She continued in desperation. "Besides, France will be leaving for England pretty soon. How on earth will we get both cars back home?" Iola could do short stints behind the wheel but with her bad knee long drives were out.

"Oh, you needn't worry about me, Kate. Cam and I have already made our plans," France said from beside her, with a secret little smirk.

"What plans?" Kate demanded.

"Never you mind, fusspot. We didn't tell you because we thought it might upset you—we know how you are—but Cam's going to take care of me and then you'll be free to do your own thing."

Kate took a deep breath and as they were nearing Coranoke bridge, she said, "I think you'd better tell me just what your plans are, Frances."

"Sorry," her sister replied. "I promised Cam I wouldn't."

"But I'm your sister," Kate agonized. From the back seat came a gentle snore. Iola was asleep.

"Just a hint, then. Pretty soon you won't have to wear yourself out trying to keep up with me, so you should be happy. Lord knows, you've complained often enough."

That hurt. Not so much as the idea of France and Cam together, but enough to make her duck her chin into her collar defensively. "I only hope you know what you're doing, France. I don't want you to get hurt."

"Oh, don't worry about me. Cam's a marshmallow," her sister said airily.

"I'm surprised you'd allow your marshmallow to spend the day with Bebe Gonlon, then. She obviously has a sweet tooth, too," Kate remarked.

"Oh, he took her to Norfolk to the airport. I'm not worried about Bebe. She's been after him for ages, but he only puts up with her because he feels sorry for her. Her father worked for Greyville and he got in trouble with the law. Now he's doing time, and Cam feels responsible. Well, he's not, but you know Cam." She shrugged. "Anyway, he says she's a good little secretary, but when she gets on his nerves, he just tells her to trot her carcass."

"Frances Ann, I don't know where you pick up slang like that," Iola said sleepily from the back. "Kate never talked that way and nor did I."

They pulled up before Bay Oaks just as the sun sank into the Pamlico Sound.

THE NEXT morning Kate decided to explore Ocracoke, the next island south of Hatteras. She invited France to go with her, but the younger girl said something about having her hair done for a party, so Kate shrugged and turned away.

The ferry ride was exhilarating, and Ocracoke was a charming town built around a silvered, bowl-like harbor accented by clusters of boats. Kate drove around, then parked and walked, following the narrow, sandy roads bordered with picket fences that enclosed thickets of yaupon and oak, yucca and oleander. The day passed pleasantly enough.

Maybe I should be wearing a Vacancy sign, she thought with a flash of humor, after a second woman with three children under five asked her if she knew where a rest room was. Feeling in need of a quick wash herself, she decided to drive back up the beach to the facilities at the ferry landing.

She got within a quarter of a mile of her goal, having stopped a while to watch a herd of Ocracoke's famous Banker ponies, when she felt a lurch. A flat tire! There was nowhere to pull over, and she watched helplessly as car after car sped past on its way to the ferry.

Well, darn! Fifteen minutes later, she sat in her car and faced the unpalatable truth. It was almost dark, there was no traffic at all now, and she had no idea how late the ferries ran. And her spare was flat.

Not that it would hurt her to spend a night in her station wagon, but she felt terribly alone here on the north end of the highway miles from anywhere. She hadn't even had the foresight to bring along a flashlight!

For perhaps twenty minutes she sat there staring at the hazy horizon. Then, as one winking white light seemed to grow into several and they were bracketed by a red and a green, it dawned on her that another ferry was approaching. While her car was stuck on Ocracoke, she was free to cross the inlet. Surely she could get a ride as far as the Coranoke bridge.

Even in the warmth of the July night she felt chilled, and she crossed her arms over her breasts as she jogged along the pavement. She was almost at the slip when the ferry eased into po-

sition and lowered its ramp. As cars crawled off the ramp and picked up speed on their way south, she stepped well off the highway. One of the cars screeched to a stop just past her and began to back up again. It stopped beside her and Cam got out to demand what the hell she was doing, hiking along the highway alone in the middle of the night.

Not until they were crossing the inlet on the way home after having secured a promise from a service station that the tire would be replaced and the car delivered to Coranoke before ten the following morning did he speak to her again, and then she'd just as soon he hadn't.

"If you ever go off like that again without letting me know, I'll have your hide!" he informed her in a blistering tone.

"Now, just a darned minute there, buster! Where I go and what I do have absolutely nothing to do with you, and you'd better get it through your thick head that just because you've got something going with my sister, and my mother seems to have latched on to you like a barnacle, there's no way you're going to start telling *me* what to do! No way!"

"Are you quite finished?" His voice was dangerously mild.

She nodded. "I just wanted you to understand that I don't need you. I don't need anyone."

"You didn't need anyone to mend your spare. You didn't need anyone to remind you to take along a flashlight in your car for emergencies..."

"I could have called someone, and—"

"Shut up!" He reached for her and jerked her across the seat, and she steeled herself against giving in to him, when by all rights she should never speak to him again. But then, where Cameron Greyville was concerned her good sense flew out the window.

It was a punishing kiss, a kiss of anger and frustration, and Kate's mouth felt bruised even as she sought more of whatever it was he was offering her. When her hands went from his chest to slide around his neck and entangle themselves in his thick, alive hair, he groaned and lifted his mouth for just an instant. "This time, woman, there's no escape for you—not until I'm good and ready," he promised her, and when his mouth covered hers again, it was a piercing, bittersweet invasion that was an act of possession in itself.

With a surge of desperate strength, Kate twisted her head aside. "Cameron, stop it! Don't do this to me. It... it isn't fair," she wailed softly. "You talk to me as if I were an idiot, and then you treat me as if—" She broke off with a gasp as his hands slipped up to weigh the ripe fullness of her aching breasts, his thumbs stroking the engorged nipples through her thin tricot bra. She despised herself for letting him use her in this casual, devastating way—this potent male animal whose virility could not resist a challenge, and she, Lord help her, was no challenge at all, did he only know it!

Her yellow knit top was no barrier to his discovering hands, and when she felt his hard, smooth palm on the cool satin of her thigh, she stretched herself out invitingly, and it could have been the center of Tokyo instead of a

dark ferry in the middle of Hatteras Inlet, for all she cared. The delicious shuddering quicksilver that rippled through her body left her devastated, limp and helpless against his inflamed passion.

There was a sudden lurch, and they both became aware of the changed tenor of the engines as the ferry swung around to engage the ramp. "Even here there's no privacy. Never enough time," he said with a sigh.

The engine roared into life and they rolled off the ferry and headed for Coranoke. With trembling fingers, Kate combed through her hair and straightened her clothes and wondered if she looked as totally devastated as she felt.

"Will you be needing a car before ten?" Cam asked tersely.

"Not that I know of," she replied.

"If anything comes up, you're free to use the Spitfire."

"Oh, are you taking charge of France's possessions now as well as her life?" she flung at him.

He didn't dignify her gibe with an answer, and Kate felt thoroughly ashamed of herself. He had that right, if anyone did. After all, they'd soon be endowing each other with all their worldly possessions. She muttered an apology under her breath and he dismissed it with a brief nod.

"I'm taking you straight home. Your mother has been worried about you," he told her.

"That I doubt!"

"You never give up, do you? A real tough case. Whether you know it or not, both your mother and your sister care a great deal for you, and when you

run off this way and worry them, I can only think you're totally indifferent to their feelings." He had pulled up in front of Bay Oaks.

She said very quietly, "I think, if you don't mind, I'll just go home. I've had a pretty full day and I'd like to get an early start tomorrow. So tell Iola—"

"That's another thing...why do you call her by her given name? Are you so afraid of showing affection for anyone? *Damn, Kate!*" He opened his door with a snort of disgust and she did not wait for him to help her out. By the time he caught up with her, she was almost at her own front door.

He held her by her upper arms and she thought he was going to kiss her again. She swayed slightly toward him, but he only shook her and released her, telling her harshly to go to bed.

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IF IOLA had been worried about her the day before, there was certainly no sign of it when she and Dotty stopped by the Gray Lady on their way to the library the next morning.

"We're having a wingding tomorrow night, Kate. Eight-thirty, and wear something special. It's a celebration!" Dotty called out.

"A celebration of what?" Kate asked.

They glanced at each other and Iola said, "Well, that's not our business to tell, Katie, but you'll know soon enough."

As if she didn't already know deep in her heavy heart, she thought.

AT FIVE the next afternoon Iola came scurrying across to Gray Lady. Someone had driven up hurriedly only moments before and Kate supposed that things were getting into full swing over there.

"Need anything?" she called out.

Iola panted dramatically and then, one hand to her bosom, told Kate that Dotty had had an attack and that the doctor was there.

After the first few moments of shock, Kate tried to think what to do, since both France and Iola tended to fall apart in emergencies. "I'll come back with you. There may be something I can do to help. Do you know how serious it is?" The thought of losing the dear little woman struck her as inconceivable!

After seeing the ambulance off with Cam following in his own car, Kate settled down to phone the guest list and explain the circumstances. France was up in her room and Iola was lying down after Kate had begged a sedative from the doctor for her. She'd probably have to stay over here tonight, but Cam would no doubt be staying at the hospital.

After all the calls were made, Kate fixed supper for them, using things that had been prepared for the party. Now she sat alone in the kitchen with her third cup of coffee.

Cam had called earlier from the hospital to say that Dotty was out of immediate danger but that they were taking her to Elizabeth City and that he'd be along after a while to throw a few things into a bag, and would she wait there, please. France, struggling

to hide her disappointment, had already gone back up to her room.

IT WAS almost eleven forty-five when Cam returned. He looked so utterly drained that Kate went to him instinctively, holding out her hand. He took it, placed it on his forehead for a brief moment, then dropped it to kiss the tips of her fingers.

"How is she?" Kate asked.

"She's amazing. The last thing she said before I left was not to let the vol-au-vents go to waste because they wouldn't keep."

A strangled laugh escaped Kate's pale mouth. "Oh, Cam, she's priceless! Tell her we put away five for supper and France accounted for three of those." He may as well know about France's healthy appetite, since he'd soon be supporting her. "I gave Iola the sedative, and she's doing fine."

Cameron had loosened his tie, and his shirt was unbuttoned almost halfway to his belt. Kate resisted an impulse to run her hands inside the opening and feel that warm, hard body, to offer it all the comfort she could give, but instead she poured him a cup of coffee. "The calls are all made, the food put away, and I fixed a plate for you," she told him.

"Good. I'll just run upstairs first and wash up. I'll pack a bag, and I want to see France. Be down in a minute."

THE NEXT DAY had thirty-six hours in it—all of them empty. It dawned on Kate that she had another class due in, and the idea seemed so irrelevant that she laughed aloud. The sound brought

Iola hurrying in from the garden, where she was tying up chrysanthemums. "What is it?"

"Nothing, Mother." Kate sobered. "I just remembered that I have a class due in this afternoon. It had completely slipped my mind."

"Oh, Kate, no! Look, sweetie, I don't think Cam will want you to go on with your classes. I mean, not under the circumstances. Can't you turn them over to someone else?"

"Oh, Iola, be practical for once. Even if I could afford to, you just don't go about canceling classes that have been scheduled for months—not when people have gone to the expense of traveling all this way."

"Well, Cam's not going to like it," Iola warned, hitching up her aged chiffon negligee to tie a sneaker after removing her work glove.

"He can just lump it, then," she replied tartly. "Look, just because Cam seems to have adopted the pair of you doesn't mean that I don't have a career to think of. I'm going over to Gray Lady now and fix a cold supper for the new group. In fact, why don't you move over there with me? There's plenty of room—well, Annie's room, at least."

"Katie, how can you? Here Cam will be coming back any minute now and you want him to walk into an empty house? You know, in some ways you're totally unfeeling, Kate."

"Oh, Mother, I'm not unfeeling. You know how much I care for Dotty, and... and Cam, too, but he'll have France with him, and I think they'll prefer to be alone."

"France? Why on earth should he... Has he called? Did they miss connections?"

"What connections? And no, of course he didn't call, but— Well, I mean, after all..." Kate stammered to a halt. No one had informed her officially of the relationship between Cam and her sister, although just why they had to make such a production of it, she couldn't say—unless France was determined to make a big entrance, sporting a ring the size of a headlight.

Iola assumed an infuriating little smirk, confirming Kate's assumption. "Well, it's certainly not my place to tell you, Katie, dear, but let me just say this, in case you get upset at the way we've handled things. Cam knows how you overreact sometimes when anyone tries to help out. You see, I told him all about Daddy..."

"You what? I do *not* overreact! You know very well that I've done all I could from the day Daddy walked out because you always said I was the strongest one of the family, and now you tell me that—"

"There, you see? You're at it again. Darling, France is twenty-one years old. She's old enough to look after herself, and in some ways she's a lot more capable than you are, and I..."

Kate's stricken eyes turned blindly away and her mother stumbled to a halt. Finally, Iola mumbled something about letting Cam take care of it, and soon Kate was alone again.

THE NEW GROUP came all at once, and when the first two carloads of chattering women pulled up in front of Gray Lady, Kate had to brace herself to greet

them with any enthusiasm at all. Summer was on the downhill slope and so was she, she decided as she showed them where to stow their gear.

By seven-thirty she had them all fed, and the rooms buzzed with the echoing sounds of eight voices. Iola had joined them for supper but had returned to Bay Oaks, and Kate had promised to come over before bedtime. She could leave the porch light on for Cam when she did.

The light, southeasterly wind rustled the leaves of the oleanders so that they sounded like rain as Kate crossed the dark area between the two houses.

Her mind was on alternative plans for tomorrow's class in case it did rain, and when she looked up into the porch she almost tripped on the bottom step. "Cam?" she inquired softly, her voice sounding uncertain.

"I left the light off on account of the bugs." He appeared at her side and took her arm, and she pulled away as if burned by his touch.

"I can manage, thanks. Where's France?"

"Probably boarding a plane for England about now."

The words rocked her back on her heels. "What did you say?"

"I said, pro—"

"Never mind, I heard you, but, Cam, why?" They were on the porch now and he led her over to the swing.

"To get the feel of the Continent, I believe was the way she put it, before her audition."

"Oh, don't be so maddening. Where did she get the money?"

"I gave it to her," he answered.

Kate's automatic response was explosive, but she managed to choke it off. "You might at least have told me," she muttered.

"We didn't tell you because we all knew exactly how you'd react."

"You mean you've all discussed me, talked about..." She bit her lip. "You have some kind of a flattering impression of me, don't you?" she accused bitterly. Her face was beginning to crumple.

"Kate, if things had gone according to my plans, we wouldn't be sitting out here getting ready to fight again, I can assure you, but—"

"Oh, of that I'm certain! It's just too bad that you're not halfway to England with my sister. What will you do—fly over as soon as... Oh, Cam! Dotty! I didn't even ask!"

"She's fine," he told her with a laugh as he dropped an arm across her shoulder and pulled her stiff body against his. "Dotty's just fine. She'll be coming home next weekend. I've made arrangements with Eileen to live in and look after her for a few weeks."

"If you need an extra hand, I can pop in between classes," she offered.

"You'll have your hands full, I hope—getting ready for something else," he told her.

When she didn't reply, he turned to look at her. "Well, aren't you going to ask me what I mean?" he teased.

"If you want me to know, I assume you'll tell me," she retorted primly, and he laughed again. She decided she'd better go inside before she did anything foolish. "Iola... I told her..." she began, and he pressed a finger across her lips.

"Kate . . . Kate Minerva Brown, will you marry me as soon as it is legally possible and put an end to this inept, mismanaged courtship?"

"This . . . will I . . . ?"

He sighed heavily. "There, you see? I try the direct approach and instead of a simple yes I get a 'this' and a 'will I.' Your family warned me."

"Cameron Greyville, just what in the devil are you talking about? If this is your idea of a joke, then I . . . then you . . ." Her voice wobbled off and to her horror she heard a noisy sob escape her.

"Katie? Darling, what is it? Have I hurt your feelings? I didn't mean to be clumsy about it, but, sweetheart, I've never done this before. These past few days have been such a strain, it's a wonder I didn't just say to hell with it and drag you off to the nearest preacher."

She was unable to prevent a watery smile, but her voice wasn't up to replying, and when he turned her so that she lay half across his lap, she buried her face in the warm, clean-smelling flesh at the throat of his open shirt.

"Katie? What's it going to be, love—wedded bliss or a life of glorious sin? I'll go either way, whatever it takes to make you finally and completely mine." He caught her chin and lifted her face, glowing warmly down at her in the soft, starlighted darkness. His lips touched the corner of her mouth, then slid lightly over her lips to the other corner, and when she would have caught his head and put a definite end to his tantalizing butterfly kiss, he shook his head. "No more until you

give me an answer, Katie Minerva. Iola says you do, France says you don't and Dotty says I'm a fool if I let you get away. Well? Do you? Will you?"

"Oh, Cam, I love you so terribly much I'll do anything you want me to. I thought you knew—although I hoped to heaven you didn't."

"But why, precious? Why couldn't you have given me a hint instead of acting like a blooming little cactus whenever I tried to get near you?"

She leaned away from him. "Ha! As I remember it, every time you got near me you tried to . . . well, you know!"

He threw back his head and roared. "I tried to what? If you mean I did my best to make love to you, then let me remind you that you were only one step behind me every time."

Before she could protest, he proceeded to demonstrate, and by the time he lifted his mouth from hers, she could only nod weakly. "You win," she said.

"No, darling, we both win—although I'll concede that I'm the bigger winner. After all, once I made up my mind to have you, it was only a matter of time."

"How could I have been fool enough to fall in love with such an insufferably smug creature?" she crowed, covering the hand that had crept up to cover her breast—the breast that covered a heart that was full to overflowing. "When did you make up your mind?" she asked.

"Somewhere between the first and the second kiss," he growled against her throat. "But once I tried to do something about it and almost ran afoul of that armor you wear, I had to

back off and try a bit of strategy. For one thing, I knew I had to get your wacky, lovable, but dependent family off your back so you wouldn't reject me and do the martyr bit. I couldn't have handled a second rejection from you, love. It seemed to me that it would be easier to solve all your problems and then sweep you off your feet, only things got all fouled up along the way."

"Poor Saint George," she cooed. "And here I was trying to keep a stiff upper lip and learn to call you brother-in-law. Did you know that?"

He didn't, and by the time she had elaborated, he felt another demonstration was in order. "Your mother explained to me, darling, about your father and his lady friends," he told her much later.

"That was why I didn't dare let myself trust you. Mother went right on loving my father even when he practically paraded his...his girls in front of her, but I could never share you. Never! It hurt me too much every time I saw the way you were with Bebe and

Stella and even France," she confessed. "Mother said some men could never be satisfied with a single flower when the whole garden was in bloom."

"Darling, the other women in my life meant about as much to me as the pictures in a seed catalog. France is a pretty scamp—spoiled, mischievous—although with a woman like Iola for a mother, there's hope for her. You have no more cause for worry about any other woman than I have about Brookwood or Palani. There's only one Kate Minerva Brown—fiercely independent, warm and loving, with an overdeveloped sense of responsibility and an irreverent sense of humor—and she's mine, promised to me way back in the beginning of time."

"You're right about one thing, at least," Katie told him breathlessly. "Whatever she is, she's yours." Her arms crept up around his neck, and just before his face blocked out the starlight, she caught a gleam of amber eyes that promised several lifetimes of enchantment.






TRACY HUGHES

Quiet Lightning



Scott Jenkins was as different from
Nick Nemoy as night and day. But he was a
puzzleful of surprises—which could
be Leslie's undoing....



“Do society a favor and stick your head in the oven,” the deep voice said from the speaker above Leslie Torrence’s head. “Ignorant pervert.” Click. “This is Nick Nemoy, go ahead.”

Leslie’s jaws ached, but she continued to grind her molars together with increasing pressure. She listened in the lobby of the New Orleans radio station as another courageous listener dared to state an opinion.

“Is it just me or is everybody out there dense?” the host asked.

Leslie leaned on the edge of the receptionist’s vacant desk. What would she say to the man who had done so much damage to her parents’ marriage? Nothing came to mind, but she trusted her instincts to take over when she came face-to-face with the notorious Nick Nemoy. By now her mother was on a plane halfway to San Juan, and her father was at home, working on some cabinets. A workaholic, her mother had called him. They could have compromised, she thought, if her mother had not called Nick Nemoy for on-the-air advice. “Divorce the schmuck,” Nick had said in his crisp thoughtless way. And the next morning, her mother had filed for a legal separation and packed to take the cruise her father refused.

She glanced at her watch and saw that it was ten o’clock. Any minute now a fat, obnoxious little man with

the stubble of a cigar between his teeth and bloodshot eyes would burst through that door. She took a deep breath as Nemoy finished with his last caller.

His theme music faded out and a popular record began playing. *Any minute now*, Leslie thought. Stepping toward the door, she stood with her feet a little apart, arms folded across her chest. She raised her chin and wished she were taller. Her dark hair was swept back from her face and lifted off her neck in a loose French twist, and she hoped it looked severe enough to counteract her innocent face and round green eyes. Straightening her blazer, she moved a little nearer to the door. Footsteps echoed hers, and she braced herself for the face-to-face encounter with Nick Nemoy.

The man who walked through the door was not the one she expected. Standing just over six feet, he was young—no older than thirty-five, she guessed—and had a full head of blond hair and a lifeguard’s tan. His dark brown, almost black eyes registered surprise at her presence, but the surprise soon faded and a pleasant smile lit them. “Hello, ma’am. May I help you?” he asked with a slightest hint of a southern drawl.

She relaxed, deciding to save her frost for the real thing. “I’m Leslie Torrence. Who are you?”

He reached for her hand and shook it warmly, his eyes never leaving hers. "I'm Scott Jenkins. Nice meeting you." He dropped her hand and, tilting his head, let his eyes take in her body. "So, Leslie Torrence," he said, his eyes rising back to hers, "what in the world brings you here?"

"Nick Nemoy," she said, feeling heat rising in her cheeks. "I'd like to speak to him."

A slow grin spread across his face, and a dimple appeared on one cheek. "And what is it you'd like to see him about?"

Leslie shifted her purse from one shoulder to the other. "I'm here as a concerned citizen who feels he's gone too far on more than one occasion."

"I see," Scott said, leaning a shoulder on the jamb of the doorway. "So you came to set him straight?"

"Precisely. Now please go tell him I'm here."

Scott shrugged. "Can't. He's already left. He always leaves through the other exit in case 'concerned citizens' like you are waiting for him." He lifted his hand and examined a fingernail, then buffed it on his shirt. "Old Nick—he's not very popular, you know."

"Yes, I can imagine," she said, looking at her feet, trying to decide what to do next. "Do you work for him?"

"Sure do," he drawled. A stray strand of hair had fallen over one eye and was caught between his lashes. "I'm an engineer of sorts."

"How can you stand it?" She felt her face flush with renewed anger and stepped toward him. "He hurts peo-

ple. The man is crazy and he actually has his own show. He gives people advice, and some of those listeners follow it."

Scott threw his head back and laughed. "No, ma'am. I doubt anyone really follows it."

"I'm telling you they do."

Scott went to the coatrack and pulled down a gray windbreaker. "I'll tell you what. Why don't I buy you a cup of coffee and we can talk about this? If I think it's something that needs to come to Nick's attention, I'll see that you get an appointment with him. How's that sound?" He hooked the coat with a finger and flung it over his shoulder. "Come on. I'm a nice guy. Look at me."

She did, knowing that what she saw was unusually appealing, knowing that he, too, was keenly aware of his attractiveness. "Well, maybe just a cup of coffee."

"And some stimulating conversation," he added with a wink, touching the small of her back and ushering her out of the radio station.

The night air was damp and cool, and Leslie smelled rain. In the distance, the clouds lit up with a flash of lightning. "There's going to be a storm," she said, glancing up at the man beside her.

"Good." He stopped to gaze down at her. "This is my car," he said, pointing to a silver Mercedes. "Why don't you ride with me?"

Leslie shook her head. "No. I think I'll just follow you. I don't make a habit of getting stuck in situations I can't control."

"Stuck?" he repeated. "Did you say stuck? I'm hurt."

"I didn't mean it that way."

"Then ride with me," he said quietly, resting a hand on her shoulder. "It's good for my ego to drive up to Morgan's with a beautiful woman. I promise you," he said, sliding his hand across to the back of her neck, "I don't take anything that isn't offered."

"How do you know there's going to be an offer?"

Scott smiled and bit his lip. "Just give me a little time," he said.

Leslie stepped out of his grasp and crossed her arms, but the hint of a grin sparkled in her eyes. "Don't be offended if I keep my Mace in my hand the whole time. I've found it comes in handy once in a while."

Scott laughed. "It's a deal."

Leslie smiled as he helped her into the car, and she relaxed as he pulled out of the parking lot.

"Do you know Nick Nemoy well?" she asked.

"As well as anybody does, I guess."

"Does he drive a Mercedes, too?" She caught herself on the last word. "Never mind. That was a stupid question."

"Not if you have a thing for Mercedes. Now if you had some other reason for asking, like a curiosity about how a lowly radio engineer like myself could afford a car like this—"

"No. Of course not," she lied quickly. "It's just that, well, I was surprised, that's all. I mean, I'd expect Nick Nemoy to be rolling in money. He probably gambles and cons people for donations...."

"And takes candy from babies?"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

Scott reached across the seat and took her hand. "Don't be so hard on Nick. He's just doing his job. And to answer that unasked question of yours, he does make a lot of money. And so do I. We're both valuable commodities."

Leslie pulled her hand out of his, worried he would feel her trembling. "That wasn't what I was getting at," she said. "I just don't know many people with Mercedes." She leaned her head against the window and tried to concentrate on the neon signs they passed.

"You know, you're downright irresistible when you're embarrassed," he said as he pulled into the parking lot of the popular riverside café.

"I'm not..." she began. "All right, I'm—"

He touched her chin with his index finger and turned her face to his. "Irresistible," he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. And without warning, he dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose.

Leslie's eyes widened as she jerked back, and Scott threw his hands in front of his face. "I forgot about that can of Mace," he said. "Please don't shoot."

Leslie laughed and shook her head. The man might very well be a lunatic, but he was entertaining.

"Have you been here before?" he asked when he opened her car door, helping her out.

"Yes. It's one of my favorite places for lunch."

"Then you're missing the best time."

He opened the door and they walked in. A lone guitarist strummed in a corner, and his soft mellow voice lent an intimate atmosphere to the room. The room was in a yellow glow from lanterns lighting the tables, instead of the fluorescent ceiling lights used during the day. Scott led her to a table looking over the Mississippi.

"You're right," she said after they were seated at right angles to each other. "It is better at night."

He nodded, leaning toward her. "I kind of feel like a glass of wine."

"Sounds nice," she said.

A waitress came to the table and took their order. When the wine arrived, Scott lifted his glass and touched it to Leslie's. "To tonight," he said. "For all its surprises and promises."

Reluctantly, Leslie drank, wondering if she had accepted a silent challenge she wasn't prepared for. Across the rim of her glass, she let her eyes answer his smile.

"Now tell me about yourself," he said. "Beginning with your birth and working right up to the moment you laid eyes on me."

Leslie struggled not to laugh. "Are you always this blunt?"

"I believe in saying what I think," he admitted, running a finger along the rim of his glass. "Do you consider that a flaw?"

She sipped her wine and let her eyes scan the room to avoid his. "Possibly. I'm not sure."

His eyes narrowed seductively. "But I'm so cute and I'm such a—"

"Great guy," Leslie finished wryly.

"I knew you'd see it soon," he said, leaning back victoriously. "Seriously,

though, what do you do for a living? I've already decided you aren't married."

Leslie thought of Stephen Tate, the fourth-year medical student to whom she was unofficially engaged. "And what led you to that conclusion? Lots of people don't wear wedding rings."

"You don't act married," he said. "And by the way, in case you were dying to know, I'm not married, either. You won't have to feel guilty if you fall in love with me." He paused to wait for her exasperation to color her cheeks. "Now what *do* you do for a living?"

Leslie shook her head and met his eyes. She mustn't encourage this man, she told herself. He was too charming, too attractive. And Stephen, whom she had been seeing for two years, would not be pleased. She cleared her throat. "I have a bookkeeping business in my home. I keep the books for several small companies who can't afford to hire someone on a full-time basis. I take care of their payrolls, their taxes, their monthly statements, and whatever else they may need."

Scott nodded and said, "I'm impressed."

Leslie set down her glass. "Why do I get the feeling that you've tried to steer me away from the subject of Nick Nemoy?"

Scott raised his eyebrows in innocence. "Me?"

Leslie's face sobered. "I really do have to speak to him."

"Are you sure you want to speak to him and not at him? Do you really care what he has to say?"

Leslie straightened. "Yes. I'd love to hear what excuse he has for destroying

people's lives. He's ruined my parents' marriage and I don't know if it can be repaired."

Scott arched a brow. "What did he do, sleep with your mother?"

Leslie gasped. "Of course not! My parents were having a few minor problems. And when my mother called Nick last night and told him about them on the air, he said, and I quote, 'Divorce the schmuck.'"

Scott let out a loud laugh. "Really?"

Leslie did not see the humor. Her eyes glared like laser beams. "And this morning my mother filed for a legal separation and took off on a plane to catch a cruise ship in San Juan."

"Good for her!" Scott said with delight.

Leslie's teeth clenched and she clipped her words out through them. "How can you say that?"

Scott leaned forward and touched her hands, but she jerked them back. "All I mean is if she took those kind of measures, she must have had a good reason."

She looked around the restaurant, reminding herself to keep her voice calm. "They could have worked out their problems if that man had not stuck his nose in. I'm telling you, the man is obnoxious and has to be stopped."

Scott chuckled. "But don't you see? That's why he's popular. Nobody likes Nick Nemoy. That's why they listen. That's why they call in."

Leslie snatched up her purse and slid back her chair. "I should have known you'd be no help."

Scott reached for her arm and stopped her from rising. "Wait. I'm just trying to keep you from doing something foolish. Nick isn't what he seems on the radio. He's really a—"

"Don't you dare tell me he's a great guy," she snapped. "He's a disgusting good-for-nothing, and I mean to tell him so."

Scott studied her, then spoke with conviction. "Whether you like it or not, if your parents had been happy together, Nick Nemoy's one-liner wouldn't have been worth a pile of ashes."

Leslie stared at her empty glass and swallowed. "This evening is quickly becoming unpleasant," she mumbled.

Scott leaned forward and cupped her chin with his hand until she let her eyes drift up to his. "It didn't start out that way," he said. "I'm truly sorry about your parents. I really do hope they work things out. But it won't happen tonight. So why don't we just enjoy each other's company and forget all that?"

She breathed out a sigh, wishing his eyes weren't so hypnotic, so absorbing. "I guess it isn't your fault," she said reluctantly.

Scott still held her chin, and unconsciously she wet her lips. "You're so beautiful," he whispered, and this time his eyes held no humor. "Even when you're angry. I could get used to looking at you, Leslie Torrence."

"You don't even know me," she said, as if it made a difference. "And I don't know you."

"Then we'll just have to work on that, won't we?" When she hesitated,

he added, "Honestly, Les. Don't I seem sincere?"

The way he changed her name to suit him stirred her. No one had ever called her Les before, not even Stephen, and it lent a touch of intimacy to their being together. Slowly, she nodded her head. "Yes, you do. But people are not always the way they seem."

SCOTT ushered her from the café into the night air, laced with the faint smell of rain.

"I don't suppose you've ever walked around here at night," he said, nodding toward the wooden deck that led behind the café. "You can see all sorts of turtles and frogs, and sometimes you can catch a snake peeking up through the water."

He took her hand and pulled her onto the deck and around into the shadows behind the building. She could see at least a dozen turtles in the shallow water below them, lit in a golden coral.

"Isn't that great?" Scott asked, leaning his elbows on the railing. "How many times have you swum in that water? And I'll bet you've never seen more than one or two of those little devils. I wish I'd brought my camera."

"I've never gone swimming in that water," she said, on the verge of laughter.

Scott clicked his tongue. "Disgraceful. A south Louisiana girl who's never even felt the Mississippi mud oozing between her toes."

Leslie laughed. "I've never exactly felt deprived," she said.

His arm unfolded from the rail and slid around her back. Before she could move, however, he had scooped her up. She screamed as he leaned forward, holding her over the rail, as if threatening to drop her into the water. She threw her arms around his neck.

"There now," he said, looking down at her. "I finally got you where I want you. Clinging to me like there's no tomorrow."

And before she could answer, his lips had claimed hers. She thought of pulling away, but as his tongue invaded the warm recesses of her mouth and coaxed her into response, the idea fled. Leslie felt herself trembling. She knew she could lie down and make love to this man without a second thought, and the knowledge terrified her. Never before had any man so thoroughly robbed her of control. Not even Stephen.

His lips tore away from hers, and his heavy breath led her to want more. He slid his hands to her waist and held her apart from him, but he still caressed her with intimate sweeps of his eyes. He lifted her hand and kissed the palm. "Leslie Torrence, will you consider having dinner with me tomorrow night?"

Leslie wondered if he could see in her eyes what he did to her. She hoped not. She opened her mouth to say yes, but a sudden thought sobered her, as if cold water had been flung in her face. The sparkle in her eyes died. "Can't. I have a date tomorrow night."

His shoulders dropped with the depth of his sigh. "The best ones are always taken." Considering the prob-

lem a moment, he cocked a brow. "A week from Tuesday? May twenty-second? July ninth? When?"

She raised her head and looked at him, but still said nothing.

Sliding his hands in his pockets, Scott leaned back on the rail. "Is this one man I'm competing with, or fifty?"

Leslie breathed a laugh. "One man. We have an . . . understanding," Leslie said.

He reached out and took her left hand, ran the pad of his callused thumb across her knuckles. "No ring?"

Leslie shook her head.

"Then there's nothing to stop me from stealing you away from him," he said, cocking his head, not dropping her hand.

"Nothing but my good judgment," she answered, the sparkle returning.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and turned her toward the car. "You can count on needing it."

As he opened the car door and propped an elbow on the silver top, she felt that judgment slipping.

*

"If I LOOK at one more ledger I'm going to go cross-eyed," Maggie, Leslie's close friend and assistant, said the next day from across the room that served as an office in Leslie's home. "Isn't there anything I can do that doesn't involve numbers?"

"At the end of a quarter, no," Leslie replied as her fingers worked rapidly on her calculator.

The telephone rang as Maggie threw back her blond head and laughed. Leslie took the call. "Stephen?"

A sneeze came from the other end, followed by a muffled sound, and then Stephen cleared his throat and answered. "Sorry, Leslie. It's this stupid cold. I think my sinuses are infected." He cleared his throat, then sneezed again. "I'm going to be zapped to-night, so I'm afraid I can't take you to see Max Havard after all."

Her eyes moved to the corner of her desk and the two tickets for the final show of the Las Vegas entertainer in town performing at a hotel in the French Quarter. "Stephen, this is his last night here. It was your idea to see him, and you have no idea what I had to do to get these tickets!"

"Leslie, I'm sick!"

You're always sick, was the thought that almost rolled off her tongue, but a sudden wave of guilty sympathy washed over her. "I know you are," she said with a sigh.

"You could take Maggie," Stephen suggested.

"She has a date."

"You could take your father," he tried again, but Leslie's attention was diverted by the ringing of the doorbell. Maggie went to answer it.

When Leslie heard her assistant's swift intake of breath and the mumbled, "Oh, my God," she stood up, straining to see around the wall, but couldn't. "Stephen, I have to go. I'll talk to dad about it. Feel better. Bye."

Hanging up the phone, she hurried to the door. A clown with a painted face, a polka-dotted costume and a handful of helium-filled balloons

smiled at her. "You Miss Torrence?" he asked as he extended the balloons to her. They floated into the house, bobbing and bouncing off one another. "Would you sign here, please?"

As the clown went back to his delivery van, Leslie reached up to the card attached to one of the bows and pulled it off. "To last night's dream. From a great guy," she read aloud. She nibbled at her bottom lip.

"What dream did Stephen have last night?" Maggie asked, awed.

"Not Stephen. Scott. The man I was telling you about."

"It's not fair," Maggie said, mocking a pout and going back to her desk. "I go to all the right places to meet all the right men. And mine all turn out to be a bunch of frogs. And you walk into a radio station to tell someone off, and pow! You meet a prince when you've already got one. There's no justice in this world."

Trying to push Scott out of her mind, Leslie went back to work, but each time she glimpsed the balloons looming near her ceiling, an uncountable smile worked across her face.

When the phone rang just as Maggie was preparing to leave for the day, Leslie answered in her most business-like voice. "Leslie Torrence."

"Leslie Torrence, Scott Jenkins," a deep voice laced with humor returned. "I tried to hire the Goodyear blimp to fly over your house, but they tell me it's in Kentucky right about now."

Leslie laughed, in spite of Maggie's disapproving expression. "The balloons are fine. Thank you." Her gaze rested on the tickets still on her desk,

and she picked them up, turned them over in her fingers and tapped them on her lips.

"Any chance of your ditching what's-his-name early tonight and thanking me properly for my thoughtfulness?" he asked.

Leslie laughed. "I've already thanked you properly. And his name is Stephen."

"Has he ever sent you balloons?"

Leslie laughed. "No, you've definitely got him there."

"Then get rid of the guy and have dinner with me. I know this cute little French restaurant that stays open late and—"

Leslie suddenly made up her mind, "Scott, I—"

"Don't say no, yet! I haven't—"

"I wasn't going to say no," she cut in again. "Stephen is sick and I have an extra ticket to Max Havard's final show. Would you like to go with me?"

A long pause followed, and then Scott breathed out a laugh. "Leslie Torrence, I'd love to go with you. But I have to work until ten. Now, as I see it, you have a choice. You could go with someone a lot less interesting and irresistible than I am and see the whole show, or you could see half of it and still have me."

"Wow. What a choice. I guess there's nothing to even think about then, is there?" she asked.

"Of course not," Scott said with perfect assurance. "I'll pick you up at ten-fifteen."

AT NINE O'CLOCK, when she answered her ringing phone, it was her mother calling from San Juan.

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm having a wonderful time," her mother said over the feeble connection. "Be sure and tell that schmuck you call your father that I'm surrounded by wealthy Latin men, and that I may decide to stay here for a few years."

"Mother, please. I know you can work this out. There's such a thing as compromise, you know."

"Compromise? I've compromised for thirty years. Anyway, I have to go now. I'll call when we reach the first port."

Leslie slammed down the phone and cursed Nick Nemoy all over again. Thirty years of marriage down the drain after a one-minute phone call.

Deciding to try to reason with her father since she had failed with her mother, Leslie grabbed her purse and darted out of the house. She'd meet Scott at the station. She'd get there before the show went off the air.

She found her father alone in his workshop. When she had related the conversation to him, he merely shook his head. "I can't imagine what's got into that woman," he said.

"Dad, she's trying to get your attention. If you have any desire to keep your marriage together, you'll catch the first plane to San Juan and take that cruise with Mom."

"And spoil all her fun?" he mumbled.

Clenching her teeth in exasperation, Leslie slid off her stool. "I give up," she said. She glanced at her watch. "I'd probably ram my head into your wall for a couple more hours if I didn't have a date."

"Stephen's taking you out at ten o'clock at night? Don't you have to work tomorrow?"

"Dad, I'm twenty-five years old, and you don't have to worry about how late I stay out. And I'm not going with Stephen. I'll call you tomorrow." Before her father could respond, she was out the door.

THE RECEPTION area was empty again when Leslie walked into the station. From the speaker overhead, she could hear the fast, sarcastic voice of Nick Nemoy: A young man in a black sleeveless T-shirt and tight jeans passed the door in the hallway and, seeing her, backed up and stuck his head in the lobby. "Can I help you?"

Leslie moved toward him. "Yes. I'm here to meet Scott Jenkins. We're going out after the show."

The man nodded. "I'm Larry Rothe, the deejay who takes over after the show." He shrugged and made a come-this-way motion with his head. "I guess you can come on back, since he's expecting you."

Leslie followed Larry down the long carpeted hall, listening as the last caller proclaimed that an angel had told him the president of the United States was, in reality, the biblical beast.

As Nick milked the caller for everything he was worth, Larry opened the door to the studio and ushered her in. To the side was the control booth enclosed in a panel of glass. She looked in and caught her breath when she saw Scott Jenkins, feet propped up, speaking into the mouthpiece attached to the headphones he wore. No one else was in sight.

"Oh, please," he was saying and, dumbfounded, she could hear his words through the speaker, "I have a weak stomach. Until Monday, this is Nick Nemoy, signing off." He punched a button and his theme music began to play. All color rushed from his face when he saw Leslie frozen behind the window. Enraged, she started out of the room, but he caught her in the hall and swung her around to face him.

"You could at least let me explain," he said, his slower southern drawl slipping back into his speech.

"Liar," she said, jerking her arm from his grip. "I hope you enjoyed it. I hope you found me an amusing toy."

"I wasn't toying with you," he said, grabbing both her shoulders. "I like you and I knew you hated Nick Nemoy. So I just decided not to tell you who I was yet."

"Deceiving, conniving..." She searched her vocabulary for a suitable word, but came up with only, "Schmuck!"

Scott tried not to smile, but she could see the amusement tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Nobody plays with me like that!" she said, storming down the hall.

He followed at her heels. "But we had a date!"

Leslie spun at the door. "Then you and Nick go! I've always heard three's a crowd!"

"But Nick's a lousy dancer!" Scott shouted after her as she dashed out into the night.

Without bothering to retort, Leslie climbed into her car, and screeched out of the parking lot.

*

"I TOLD YOU he was a frog," Maggie said the next morning when Leslie related the story of the night before. "I haven't seen you all worked up like this since, well, since Nick Nemoy called your father a schmuck!"

Leslie's face reddened at the reminder. "All right. I made a mistake. I'll admit I was charmed by him at first. It won't happen again, and I think this subject has about worn itself out, don't you agree?"

"Okay," Maggie said, punching at her calculator as the doorbell rang. "Saved by the bell."

Leslie waved her off with a smile and opened the door. Immediately her smile faded when she stood face-to-face with Scott Jenkins.

"May I come in?"

"I'm working."

He nodded. "I know. That's why I'm here. It's business."

"Business?"

Maggie pulled Leslie out of Scott's way and held out a hand. "Hi, Scott. I'm Maggie Drummond, Leslie's assistant. Come on in."

Scott shook her hand warmly as he strolled into the office.

Speechless, Leslie could only stare incredulously at the man. He set his briefcase on his lap and opened it. "I'd like to hire you, Les," he said.

Leslie didn't take her eyes off him as she reached for the files. "To do what?"

He nodded and pointed toward the files. "There are three small businesses there whose books are in bad shape."

Leslie swallowed and glanced at the files. "Jim's Auto Accessories?"

He laughed. "It's a long story. My brother was having trouble so I bought him out. He runs the place and I take care of the bills. I've been a little neglectful keeping the taxes filed right, though."

Leslie dropped her eyes to the next file. "A Chinese restaurant?"

"It was going under and I knew the owner from school. What can I say? So far the profits have been pretty good."

She looked at the next file. "What's this?" she asked, while she shuffled through receipts and blank overdue tax forms.

"My hobby," he said. "Photography. Occasionally, I sell to a magazine, and now and then someone buys a print."

She sighed and lifted icy eyes to him. "Well, I can see that you do need a bookkeeper, but my load is pretty heavy now," she said.

Maggie ignored Leslie's comment and turned to Scott. "We're only this busy because it's the end of the quarter and time for annual taxes. In a few weeks we'll barely have enough to pay my salary."

Leslie stood up. "Maggie, I'll decide—"

"Come on, Les," Scott urged. "I need help."

Her eyes flashed to Maggie, who quickly went to her desk and began shuffling papers. "All right!" she clipped. "But I don't have time to talk about this now."

His smile returned and he stood. "How about tomorrow?"

She sighed. "All right. Saturday morning then. About ten-thirty?"

"Good," he said, following her to the door. She opened it and leaned against it. "I'm looking forward to our new relationship," he said, leaning forward as if to kiss her. She jumped back, and he chuckled and touched her nose. Then he pulled the door shut behind him.

She turned to see Maggie prop her legs on the desk, threatening to grin. "Did you see those eyes?"

Leslie wilted against the wall.

SATURDAY MORNING the doorbell rang at ten.

"You're early," she said as she opened the door. Stephen greeted her, laden with an armload of medical books.

"Who were you expecting?"

"A new client," she said, following him inside.

She watched as Stephen sank into a recliner and sneezed. "I've been having chest pains and a low-grade fever. My throat is sore. My guess is an early stage of pneumonia."

"Probably," Leslie agreed. He had been studying respiratory disorders, and it was not unusual for him to actually suffer symptoms as he studied them.

"How about some breakfast?" he asked, taking her hand. "I need a nice hot meal. I haven't felt like cooking."

Leslie sighed. "Stephen, I have a business meeting in half an hour."

A wave of guilt washed over her. After all, he was used to her doing things for him when he didn't feel well. She had never minded before.

"What are you so nervous about?" Stephen asked. At that moment the doorbell rang, and she jumped. Stephen laughed. "Relax."

Leslie took a deep breath and went to the front door. Scott greeted her wearing nothing but a pair of cutoff jeans. His tanned skin glistened in the warm sunlight.

Leslie tried to keep her eyes on Scott's face. "You're the only man I know who dresses so carefully for a business appointment."

He laughed and glanced down at himself. "I did have a shirt, but I had car trouble on the way over and it kind of got covered with grease. I had planned to go home and change, but by the time I had wheels it was almost ten, so I came straight here." He grinned and shrugged. "Does it bother you?"

She tore her gaze from his body. "Of course not." Leslie glanced through the trees shading her lawn and saw the topless Jeep parked in her drive. "Is that yours?"

He shook his head. "It's my brother's. We swapped while he works on mine." He leaned closer to her. "Get the files and come with me," he said intimately. "We'll talk about them at my place. I can change there and we can get right to work."

"She's not going anywhere with you," Stephen said from the doorway, and Leslie spun around like a child caught stealing from the cookie jar. "What kind of work is it you expect to do with my fiancée, Mr...?"

"Jenkins," Scott supplied. "What kind of business does your fiancée—"

he put emphasis on *fiancée* "—usually do with her clients?"

Stephen peered down his nose at Scott. His nostrils flared. And then he sneezed.

"Bless you," Scott said in an insufferable drawl, then turned to Leslie. "Ready to go?"

"Wait for me in the Jeep," she said finally.

Scott nodded, then turned back to Stephen. "You take care of that cold now." And he sauntered out the door.

Leslie blew out an annoyed breath. "Stephen, I'm not accustomed to having a chaperon for business meetings."

"You are not going with him! I'm warning you, Leslie—"

"And I'm warning you," she snapped, turning to face him. "When it comes to my business, your intrusions are not welcome. If you want to continue having a relationship, you'd better learn that now. Lock the door when you leave."

Closing the door behind her, she heard a loud thud within the house and prayed nothing had been broken.

Scott's dark eyes watched her as she got into the Jeep. "Can't say I blame him," he said, cranking the engine and backing out of the driveway. "If I were in his place I'd fight like hell to keep you, too."

HIS MODEST ranch-style house was at the edge of a beautiful plot of land. She noted the masculine feel of each room, from the large living room with oak floors and throw rugs to the adjoining kitchen decked with every

modern convenience that could make bachelor life simpler.

Grabbing his payroll books and files, he led her out onto the redwood sundeck. She watched him as he settled across from her at the table, opening one of the files.

Leslie's mind couldn't have been further from tax tables and government forms, she thought, letting her eyes drift to the green and wooded expanse of property.

"Is all this land yours?"

"All mine," he said. "One day I'm going to build a huge house right smack in the middle of it. And I'll just fish and ride horses and take pictures all day long."

"Is that what you do now? Your show is only two hours every night."

He nodded toward the files. "I told you I own those businesses. And my photography is pretty important to me. Besides, a lot more work goes into being Nick Nemoy than you know. I can't argue about politics and foreign policy if I haven't done my homework."

"But you discourage everyone who calls in." Leslie shook her head.

Scott's face became tight and tired. "Most of our citizens don't know who the secretary of state is, or what countries we're giving military aid to, or what countries are starving. I want to make them think, form opinions about those things. So I make outrageous statements about the issues and take ridiculous stands, and they fight with me. Sometimes it slaps them in the face and they think harder about it."

"My mother didn't think harder about it. She left my father."

"She just took a little vacation. In this state she can't get divorced until a year after separation. A lot can happen in a year."

"How do you know all that? Are you divorced?"

"Nope. I used to be a lawyer."

Her frowning face held disbelief.

"Did you get disbarred?"

He sent her a punishing glance.

"No, I gave it up." His face was sober, quiet, contemplative.

"My disillusionment built up gradually. The last straw came when one of the clients I'd proved innocent went out and killed again." His voice broke and he turned his face into the wind.

She saw moisture in the corners of his eyes. "How did you become Nick Nemoy?"

"There was this guy, Willis, who used to have a talk show much like mine—except he wasn't quite as obnoxious." A grin broke out over his face, providing such relief from the tension that Leslie couldn't help returning it. "One night someone called in and started a tirade in defense of the justice system. I called in." He laughed. "I was mad. I can't even believe some of the things I said to Willis about that caller. Anyway, I started phoning every night, disagreeing with earlier callers and arguing with Willis. I told Willis my name was Nick, and people started calling and asking if they could speak to me. The station loved it. When Willis retired, the station asked me to take over his show." He spread his arms and shrugged.

"And that's how you became Nick Nemoy," Leslie said. "I can't believe it."

The dimple again bit into Scott's cheek, and mischief sparkled in his eyes. He inched closer to her, until Leslie could feel the warmth of his breath.

Leslie's last shreds of restraint were stripped away as Scott's lips met hers. The kiss was hungry, probing. His arms closed around her, pulling her off-balance. As his hands molded the soft curves of her waist, his mouth opened and closed on hers, making her gasp with need, creating an appetite she'd never known existed. The intensity of her need frightened her, and when his lips at last left hers to nibble along her throat, she breathed the word "No."

He sighed raggedly, then raised his head, his gaze so piercing she could almost feel his mark on her soul.

"I shouldn't be here," she said in a shaky voice. "Stephen trusted me until today." Until she had met Scott, she had trusted herself.

Scott brought her face back to his. "I didn't stop kissing you because of Stephen. If the time was right for me to make love to you, all the Stephens in the world wouldn't have stopped me. I stopped because I still don't meet your standards," he mumbled. "I'm Nick Nemoy, as well as Scott Jenkins, and you can't accept that with or without Stephen."

He smiled sadly and pushed her hair behind her ear. "Oh well," he said. "I've been told my ego could stand a little bruising."

Leslie wished she could wipe the hurt from his face. "Scott, I'm—"

Holding up a hand to stop her words, he pressed a kiss into the palm,

branding her there as he had already branded her soul. "Now come on. We have work to do."

An unspoken truce kept them from yielding again to the chemistry sizzling between them. The afternoon was long and tense. By the time the sun was setting, Leslie was exhausted.

"Sorry I took up your whole day off," Scott said, pushing her hair out of her face.

She smiled. "I enjoyed it."

"In spite of yourself?" he asked with a crooked grin.

She lowered her eyes and didn't reply.

"Well, I guess I can only hope you'll get hung up on my books and need another 'in-depth' discussion with me."

Smiling wryly, he placed his arm around her shoulders and led her to the Jeep.

SHE STARED at the contents of her refrigerator that night. A six-pack of diet colas, a bag of carrots that had gone soft, two eggs. The emptiness there seemed to fill her, too, darkening and widening voids she'd never known she had.

When the doorbell rang, she rushed to the door and swung it open.

Surrounded by suitcases was her mother, her dark hair in disarray, her face pale.

"Mother! I thought you were on a cruise ship!"

As her cab drove away, Abbie Torrence picked up two of her suitcases and started in. "I don't really want to talk about it," she said, going straight into the living room.

"Mom, what's wrong?" Leslie asked, bringing the remaining piece of luggage in.

Her mother moaned, falling onto the recliner. "I drank the water. Couldn't even make it onto the cruise ship. I spent two horrible days in a motel in San Juan and decided to come home."

Leslie couldn't help grinning. "Dad's going to be thrilled."

"Oh, no, he's not," her mother corrected. "Your father is not going to find out. As far as he is to know, I'm on the ship being wine'd and dined by handsome millionaires."

Leslie gasped. "If you aren't telling Dad you're home, what do you plan to do for the next two weeks?"

"Move in with you," she announced. "I'll sleep in the guest room. You won't even know I'm here."

Leslie's face fell.

*

LESLIE'S DREAMS of Scott did not cease with the passing of a week, and his phone calls late at night only served to remind her where her heart really lay. Although recovered, Stephen stayed away. He was busy with a research paper, he said.

"I don't know what you see in that man," Abbie said on Saturday afternoon as they sat eating lunch. "Being the wife of a doctor will be worse than what I've had to put up with. You think he's busy a lot now? You wait until he has patients calling him at all hours...."

Leslie's mind drifted. She had always considered Stephen's hectic schedule a blessing, for it gave her time

to lead her own life. But Scott was another story. Any woman who committed herself to him would hate the times he wasn't around, the way she had hated each day since she'd last seen him a week earlier.

Suddenly, a loud knock intruded and Leslie jumped.

"It's the back door," Abbie said, jumping up. "It must be your father! I'll hide in the guest bedroom."

Giving her mother a chance to get to her room, Leslie opened the door.

Her father stormed in. "What the hell is this?" he bellowed, handing her a postcard.

Leslie took it and looked down, saw her mother's scrawl about the wonderful time she was having in Curaçao.

"Look at the postmark!" he shouted. "It's postmarked New Orleans. That woman isn't on any cruise." Her father raised a finger and shook it in her face. "When you see her you tell her I know what she's up to."

So that her father wouldn't see her look of guilt, Leslie cleared her plate from the table. "Dad, what on earth would she be up to? Whether she went on the cruise or not, she still left you. Anger isn't going to save your marriage."

"No, but telling her off might save my sanity." He opened the door and started out. "You warn her for me."

Leslie collapsed into her chair when her father slammed out of the house, and Abbie emerged.

"Mother, how could you?" Leslie asked wearily.

Abbie threw up her hands. "The postmark never occurred to me."

Covering her mouth with both hands, she looked at Leslie with dread-filled eyes. "Oh, no. I mailed another one yesterday."

Leslie nodded slowly, pursing her lips to keep from making a comment she would regret. "Well," she said finally, "at least we know to expect dad Monday." Her eyes softened, and she took her mother's hand.

The doorbell rang. Leslie wondered what disaster would befall her now.

But the sight of Scott in cutoff jeans and a white pullover was far from disastrous. In his hand was a single pink rose. "For you," he said, smiling.

"It's pretty," she said, touching the velvety petals to her lips and inhaling the sweet fragrance.

"Thanks. I picked it from your garden."

Leslie shook her head and grinned up at him. "I should have known. So, what brings you here?" She had not yet let him in, for she couldn't bear the thought of having to explain who he was to her mother.

"Biloxi. Go put your bikini on under your shorts. We'll be the first to break in the gulf this year."

Leslie's eyes danced. "I don't have a bikini," she said.

Scott grinned, his dimple a long cleft in his cheek. "Then go without. I will if you will," he challenged.

Leslie cleared her throat and stepped back. "My one-piece should go nicely. Give me five minutes."

"Hello," Abbie said, peeking into the hall. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything. I just wondered who was at the door."

Leslie swallowed. "Mother, I'd like you to meet Scott Jenkins. He's a new client of mine." Deciding not to go into a long explanation, she headed for her room.

Stripping off her clothes as fast as she could, Leslie pulled out a dark green swimsuit. As she put it on, her mother appeared in the doorway. Leslie winced, anticipating the lecture that was sure to follow.

"He's gorgeous! Where have you been hiding him? And all this time I worried about your involvement with Stephen. Now, let's see. If Stephen calls I'll tell him that you were called away on business and had to—"

"I'll deal with Stephen," Leslie said. "If he calls just tell him...tell him the truth." Running a brush through her hair, she grabbed a towel and hurried back to Scott.

He looked up when he heard her. "Ready?"

Leslie nodded and said goodbye to her mother, who followed them to the door.

By the time they were cruising along the highway skirting the beach, Leslie had forgotten her earlier tension. When he pulled over at last, it was into a small parking lot near an abandoned stretch.

They gathered the blanket, towels and ice chest Scott had brought and trekked down to the beach. The April sun bathed them with its gentle heat.

The afternoon flew by, and Leslie couldn't remember a time she'd ever enjoyed more. They sunbathed and played in the waves, then sunbathed and played some more. Finally they returned to the blanket after their last

swim, ready to relax and get dry before leaving. Scott settled behind her, sliding his arms around her waist, pulling her back against him. She rested her head against his shoulder, felt him kissing the part in her hair, sending a shiver coursing through her.

Scott's voice was as soft and gentle as the dusk falling around them. "If I'm going to be in love with you, I need to know about Stephen."

"You don't have to worry about Stephen," she answered, not moving from her position. "Because I'm not in love with him." *I'm in love with you*, she wanted to say, but the words caught in her throat.

After a long quiet moment, he again spoke softly into her ear. "What are you going to do about him?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't want to hurt him. He needs me. He believes in me."

"It's not just Stephen, is it?" Scott asked. "Am I my own worst enemy where you're concerned?"

Deciding not to break the bond of quiet loving companionship by being dishonest, she nodded her head. He pressed his face into her hair and squeezed her as if it might be the last time. "It's getting late," he said finally in a voice that revealed harnessed emotions. "Let's go home."

They dressed and loaded the car. When they drove away, he held her knee with his free hand, and she rested her hand over his.

The silence was broken when they reached New Orleans. With a somber expression, Scott glanced at her. "Les, will you do something for me? Come to the radio station with me Monday

night. Listen to me while I do my show."

The peace that had carried Leslie through the past few hours shattered like crystal. She wanted to forget Nick Nemoy so that she could continue loving Scott. "I can't," she said.

By the time he pulled into her driveway, the air was thick with tension. "What do you want from me, Les?"

"I don't know," she said. "What do you want from me?"

"A relationship." He looked at her, and she could see honesty lighting his face even in the darkness. "I want you to accept all of me. It's no good putting aside the things about me that you can't deal with and pretending they don't exist."

"I know," she said, rubbing her eyes.

He took her hand and pressed it to his face. "Come with me Monday night. Just think about it," he pleaded. "I need you to understand."

"I'll think about it," she whispered, and her reward was a long gentle kiss that made her dread leaving him more than she'd dreaded anything in her life.

The bright glow of headlights on the street in front of her house jolted her back to reality. Turning around to see the car, she gasped.

Stephen had climbed out and was walking toward them.

"WHAT THE hell are you doing with her?" Stephen asked through gritted teeth as Scott got out to meet him.

"I'm bringing her home," Scott said, his body relaxed yet ready to

pounce. "Not that it's any of your business."

"None of my business?" His hand slapped against Scott's sleeve, twisting the cloth. As quick as lightning, Scott's hand closed roughly on Stephen's collar.

"Stop it," Leslie said. "Both of you. Come inside and we'll talk." She opened the door, letting the light from the house rob the front yard of its neutrality. Eyes shooting sparks, the two men dropped their hands and followed her inside.

"How long has this been going on?" Stephen asked, his nostrils flaring.

Leslie sighed. "If today hadn't been such a spur-of-the-moment thing I would have told you before I left. I had every intention of telling you when I got back."

"What were you going to tell me?" Stephen snapped.

"That... that I wanted us to slow down a little. That..." Her voice faltered, and she swallowed. "Oh, Stephen. Don't do this. Don't make me stand here and tell you like this. I didn't want it this way."

"You wanted to break it to me easy?" Stephen asked, his eyes narrowing. "You wanted it to be clean and simple? Leslie, do you know who this guy is? Do you have any idea?"

"Yes," she said, uncertain of what he was leading to.

"This guy is Nick Nemoy! You've heard his show. It's all a game to him. Don't you see that his current game is fast-talking you into his bed?"

"You're out of line, Tate!" Scott fairly snarled.

"Shut up, Jenkins!" Stephen shouted. "You don't belong here. Why don't you get the message and just get out of here?"

"Not until Les tells me to," he said. "And if any messages have been handed out tonight, they were directed at you. I think you're the one who should leave!"

"You can both leave!" Leslie blurted.

Scott sighed heavily. "I think she's right. She needs to be alone."

"I'm not leaving," Stephen said flatly.

"Yes, you are, pal," Scott said quietly, "if I have to drag you out myself."

"Get out!" Leslie said, storming past them and opening the front door. "Now." She leaned against the door, choking out sobs.

Slamming his hand into the jamb, Stephen went out. Scott hesitated next to her, touched her hand where it clutched the doorknob, then disappeared into the darkness.

MIDNIGHT. Leslie lay in bed, wishing for relief from the depression that weighed on her. *It's all a game to him.* Stephen's words echoed and reechoed in her mind. She *was* more than a game, wasn't she?

The phone rang.

"Les, listen to me," he said. "What we had today was special. It could get more special. Please don't turn your back on me now."

Leslie sighed. "I guess I'm just wondering if I'm floating through some fairy tale that can't come true."

"Since you found out I was Nick Nemoy, I haven't pretended to be anything I'm not. So what if my armor's a little tarnished?" Scott asked, and she could hear the smile in his voice.

"My knight in tarnished armor," she whispered, running a finger in light circles across her pillow. "I think I like the sound of that. I'm falling in love with you." The words came out tremulously. "I keep feeling like I need to reach out and grab something to stop my fall."

"Let yourself fall, Les," Scott murmured against the phone. "I promise I'll catch you. And, Les," he added softly, "I'm in love with you, too. Don't forget that. Good night."

The dial tone hummed its comfort-ing message as she held the phone in her hand, smiling at the last words that had come through the receiver.

*

THE LAST Monday before the April fifteenth tax deadline was chaotic. Clients were in and out to confer about added deductions and tax breaks, and the telephone rang constantly.

A timid knock came on the door that led from the kitchen to the office, and Abbie stuck her head in. "Honey, I hate to bother you," she said, "but can I talk to you?"

"No problem," said Leslie, and she went into the kitchen. Her mother was surrounded once again by packed suitcases. "Mom, where are you going?"

"I've been thinking about that other postcard I sent your father," she said. "He'll probably show up here any time now, and I'm really not up to facing

him. I thought I'd find a Holiday Inn in Gulfport or Biloxi and spend a few days there. Then I'll be out of your hair, too. I really need a little more time before I have it out with your father," she said wearily.

The sadness and hopelessness in her mother's voice pierced her heart. "Mother, please go back to him. He's angry now, but he'll come around. You love each other."

"That's not enough." A horn sounded in the front drive, and Abbie picked up her suitcases. "That's my taxi. I'll see you in a couple of days."

As Leslie stood at the side door and watched her mother walk to the cab, an inescapable feeling of helplessness overwhelmed her.

THE SCREEN DOOR at the back of the house slammed as someone came in.

"Abbie!" her father yelled. "It's me and I'm on to you."

Leslie rolled her eyes and went into the kitchen. "Dad, she's not here."

"Don't give me that," her father said with steely eyes. "I got another one of these intelligence-insulting postcards today."

"Dad, she was here, but she left this afternoon," Leslie said.

Sam's eyes narrowed and his face flushed red. "You mean to tell me she was here and you let her leave?"

"She knew you'd be coming over, so she decided to get out before you did," she said softly. "It's not too late to join her. You could try the Holiday Inns in Biloxi and Gulfport. By tomorrow you two could have all your problems worked out."

He cocked his head, running a callused hand along his stubborn jaw.

Leslie grabbed his hand. "Dad, why can't you understand? When you promised her that cruise, she was like a child-bride preparing for her honeymoon. And then you pulled out on her."

"Only because I had to!" he shouted, slamming his hand down on the countertop. "My best customer for twenty-eight years lost everything he owned in a fire. Now what was I supposed to do when he asked me to make his cabinets? Just tell him, 'No, I have to go take a cruise'? The man lost his home, and if I could give him back a little of it by making him the same cabinets I built him all those years ago, why was that so wrong?"

"He could have waited two more weeks. Obviously, your wife needed you more."

"Helluva way to show it!" he belted.

Somehow over all the noise Leslie heard the doorbell ring and, without excusing herself, she threw up her hands and ran to the door.

Scott stood there, a perplexed look on his face. "What's all the yelling about?" he asked, taking hold of her shoulders protectively and peering around her.

"It's my father," she said, the sight of Scott and his gentle touch calming her exasperation. "Mom left this afternoon to keep from having to confront him." Leslie was pulling Scott into her kitchen, where Sam stood with the same red-faced, short-fused expression she had left him with. "Dad, I want you to meet Scott Jenkins."

"Mr. Torrence," Scott greeted, shaking hands. "Leslie tells me you've recently lost a wife."

Sam's eyes shot to Leslie, and she caught her breath. "I can't believe you'd spread gossip about your own parents," he snapped, his face turning a darker crimson.

"Don't blame her," Scott defended. "She only told me because she felt I might be a little responsible."

"Scott!" Leslie warned.

"Responsible how?" her father asked.

"She felt that something I'd said on my radio show had caused your wife to leave."

Sam's icy green eyes shifted from Scott to Leslie, then back to Scott. His bewildered frown faded slowly and turned to uncertain anger. "What did you say your name is?"

"Scott Jenkins!" Leslie blurted.

"That's my real name," Scott amended, as if he had no idea the revelation would produce more than a nod of the head. "But I'm Nick Nemoy on the show."

"Oh, no!" Leslie moaned, closing her eyes.

"Why you high-and-mighty son of a..."

Leslie looked up in time to see her father rearing a fist.

"But he's not like Nick Nemoy in real life," Leslie said quickly. "Or I didn't think he was until I saw his performance just now." Her green eyes blazed at Scott.

"Look, Mr. Torrence. The way I figure it, you should thank me. After all, what kind of woman would walk

out on a man after thirty years of marriage?"

"She didn't walk out on me," her father objected loudly.

Scott shrugged. "She filed for separation, didn't she?"

"To make a point," Sam shouted. "I did her wrong. I've been neglecting her."

"Doesn't sound like she needed much attention to me," Scott suggested. "Seems like a woman who takes off on a vacation alone knows exactly how to take care of herself."

"But sometimes a woman needs more!" Sam spluttered. "And I don't need any arrogant radio guy telling me or my wife what state my marriage is in!" Sam raged, turning to Leslie. "I'm going to find her tonight and straighten this mess out, and nobody is going to stop me!" He stormed through the door and slammed it behind him.

Leslie watched through the window, dumbfounded, as her father screeched his car down her driveway.

Scott was grinning from ear to ear. "Well, it worked. Nothing like a little psychology. I threw his own stand in his face, and he saw how absurd it was."

Leslie gaped at him. "Most men are on their best behavior when they meet the father of the woman they're involved with. You just made an ass of yourself in front of mine and arranged it so that he'll never forgive me for seeing you."

Scott held his hands out to calm her. "When your parents get back together, he won't even remember all

this." Scott's mouth quirked upward, and he laughed slightly.

"Oh, I hate it when you find something funny in everything! Sometimes I just want to slap that smile off your face!"

Only then did Scott realize the gravity of the situation. Strong hands with the slightest hint of a tremor slid around her waist, but she shoved his hands away.

"You made me fall in love with you, Scott. You said you'd be there to catch me. 'What's the worst that could happen?' you asked. *This* is the worst that could happen! I could fall in love with one-half of you and detest the other half. I could come crashing down to earth like I just did! And who was there to catch me? Nick Nemo? What a joke!"

"I love you, Les," Scott said softly. "I don't turn into Nick Nemo when the moon is full. He's there all the time."

She swallowed hard, but the suffocating lump of emotion remained in her throat. "I know," she whispered. "I just didn't want to see. You'd better go. Goodbye, Scott," she choked out, opening the door.

THE SLIDING glass doors on the side of Scott's house were open when she pulled into the driveway two days later. Peeking in, she caught sight of Scott, his broad shoulders hunched over his desk, his eyes absorbed in the book before him.

"Hi," she said quietly. His eyes looked tired, and a shadow of stubble darkened his face. "I'm sorry," she

whispered, her eyes welling. "I'll forgive you your flaws if you'll forgive me mine."

He opened his arms. When she fell into them, she felt a rush of love. His lips made their way down her cheek, finding her mouth. She leaned into him.

"I have to be somewhere in fifteen minutes," he whispered. "If I'd known you were coming I'd have canceled."

"I have to go back to work, too," she whispered. "We're swamped. Can you come over tonight before your show?"

"Yes," he whispered, kissing her hair. "I'll be there."

"Scott, I love you," she said.

"I love you, too."

With his arm around her, he walked her to her car and helped her in, then watched her drive away until she was out of sight.

IT WAS SIX-THIRTY when the doorbell rang, and hoping it was Scott, Leslie hurried to answer it. Once again, her mother stood at her door, suitcases in hand. "Mother, what happened?"

"I got lonely," Abbie said flatly, coming in.

"Didn't Dad find you?"

"Find me? No. Was he looking for me?" A spark of hope lit her mother's eyes.

"He sure was. I told him you were at one of the Holiday Inns. I can't believe he didn't find you."

Abbie's face fell. "I stayed somewhere else. Oh, no."

"Don't panic, Mom," Leslie said. "He'll be back."

"And I'll be waiting," Abbie said, hurrying to the guest room.

Her mother had scarcely disappeared when the doorbell rang again. Praying it would be her father, Leslie opened it. Stephen greeted her.

"Stephen, you shouldn't be here," she told him as he pushed into the house. "I have other plans."

Stephen dropped his books on the table and turned back to her. "With Jenkins?"

"Yes," she said.

Stephen slammed his fist on the table, propped his foot on a chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Leslie, I can't deal with this kind of instability in my life if I'm going to keep doing well in school."

"Stephen, things couldn't be more stable. We are over. Finished. Even if Scott and I can't make it last, there's nothing left for you and me."

He covered his eyes with a hand. Leslie watched his body shake with sobs, and a sudden wave of sympathy washed over her. She went to him and hugged him. He hung on to her, pulling her closer than she wanted, his wet bristled face bending toward her unwilling one. His embrace was crushing as his lips closed over hers, prying her mouth open. She tried to push him away, but his teeth ground painfully into her mouth until she tasted blood.

As Leslie struggled fruitlessly, she heard voices and the closing of a door. The intrusion softened Stephen's hold on her, and at last she broke free.

Scott was standing in the doorway, her mother behind him. His eyes were eloquent with pain and betrayal.

Without a word, he walked back to the door and slammed it behind him.

"Scott!" she shouted, running after him, but by the time she had reached the door he was in his car and screeching out of her driveway.

"I'm sorry," her mother said softly. "I let him in without knowing..."

Ignoring her mother, Leslie turned to Stephen. "Get out!" she screamed. "Get out of here and don't ever come back!"

"LESLIE, you're bleeding!" Abbie wailed when her daughter turned back to her, shaken and devastated.

"Mother, he's gone. He thought..."

"It's all my fault. I heard a car pull into the driveway and thought it might be your father, so I just answered the door. I didn't know Stephen was here."

Leslie wiped her tears. "Everything's ruined. Scott probably thinks it was all some cruel joke that I set up. How do I convince him that it wasn't?"

"You go after him," her mother said. "You get in your car and find him and just tell the truth."

Leslie straightened, took a deep breath, made up her mind. "All right. He'll just have to believe me. I'll just have to convince him."

Rushing out to her car, she got in and took a deep breath. He wouldn't have gone to the studio yet, she thought. Cranking up her car and pulling out of the driveway, she decided to go to his house. Rehearsing a hundred different ways to tell him she loved him, that there would never be anyone else, she raced through the seemingly endless streets to Scott's.

His car was not there and the lights in the house were off. Mumbling an expletive, she backed out of the drive again and headed for the radio station. His car wasn't there, either. After checking out several spots in New Orleans she had heard him mention, she gave up. She would have to wait until his show was over.

When she got home, her mother greeted her at the door. "Did you find him?"

"No," Leslie said dismally.

"He came back after you left," Abbie told her hurriedly. "When I opened the door he stormed in and said that he wasn't going to let you go that easily. Said you may be having second thoughts, but he intended to turn you around."

Leslie laughed, throwing her hands up in the air. "Did you tell him I didn't have any second thoughts?"

Abbie shook her head. "All I had time to tell him was that Stephen had forced that kiss on you and that if he'd hung around long enough he would have seen the blood on your mouth to prove it."

"Oh, no, Mom. What did he say?"

Abbie took Leslie's shoulders. "He said that no matter what he did he kept letting you down. And then he left, muttering that it was time to end this once and for all."

Leslie's face fell, and fresh tears sprang to her eyes. "Just like that? He gives up just like that?"

Abbie hugged her daughter. "I'm sorry, honey."

Sinking onto the couch, Leslie stared at the coffee table in front of her. Where did she go from here?

When the doorbell rang, she jumped up to answer it, praying it was Scott. It was her father.

Coming in, he rubbed his hand through his hair. "I'm worried about Abbie," he said. "I looked in every hotel up and down the coast and couldn't find her. Do you think she's done something drastic?"

"Drastic enough," her mother said from the doorway of the foyer. "I came back."

"Abbie!" her father bellowed, starting toward her, then catching himself and stopping. "Where the hell have you been? You're driving me crazy! Get your things. You're coming home with me!"

"I am not going anywhere with you in that mood!" She moved out of the foyer and into the office to get farther away from him, and he followed her.

"This is not a mood! This is frustration!" Reaching for her hand, he gave it a tug. "I love you, you crazy woman," he said softly. "Come home with me and I swear you'll see a change. Besides, we have to pack for our cruise. I've rescheduled it. We leave this weekend."

"No," Abbie wailed. "No cruises. Please!"

Leslie smiled as her father got her mother's suitcases, the bickering never stopping. "It was your idea. I thought you'd always wanted to take a cruise."

"The thought makes me sick already. Please. Can't we just stay home for a while?"

"We'll see. I've got some travel brochures at home. Maybe you'll change your mind. It'll all be different

with me there," he said with calm self-assurance as he opened the front door.

Suddenly remembering Leslie's plight, Abbie turned to her daughter. "Oh, honey, I forgot about you. Sam, we can't leave her. She's going through a dilemma."

"I can take care of it, Mom," Leslie promised.

"Is it that Nemoy character?" Sam asked bluntly.

Leslie nodded. "Sorry, Dad, but I'm in love with him."

A restrained smile touched Sam's mouth. He sighed heavily. "Knew how to handle me, didn't he?" Shaking his head, he laughed. "Yes, sir, I guess you could do a lot worse."

Leslie felt half her burden drain from her shoulders, and suddenly it seemed that her father's blessing brought a whole new light to things. If her father could change his mind, maybe she could change Scott's. Maybe it wasn't too late.

"Go after him, Leslie," Abbie said, turning to her daughter.

"I will," she said. Smiling, she watched as her father loaded the car with her mother's luggage, then scooted in next to her, reaching for her hand and setting it on his knee.

Leslie watched as they drove off, her heart happy for them, but at the same time heavy with the need to see Scott. She lifted her head and gazed at the sky, full and dark and overcast with clouds. It had been that way the first night she'd met Scott. The sky had been dark except for the occasional quiet flash of lightning miles away. He had drawn her under his spell that night, and when she'd learned he was

Nick Nemoy, nothing had really changed. She had still been his captive, despite the two sides to the man that seemed to contradict each other. The knight and the dragon, feuding with each other....

Funny, in her mind and heart, the knight wasn't quite perfect and the dragon didn't seem as big, nor as contemptible, as he had before. She loved them both. Scott Jenkins and Nick Nemoy would forever have to battle for her love.

It was after eight when Leslie had pulled herself together enough to go after him again. His show had started and she knew she couldn't see him until it was over, but she was unwilling to sit in one place and wait. So she got into her car and drove the back streets of New Orleans, listening to Scott at work.

The dialogue on Nick's show had to do with the teacher's strike. A taxpayer was complaining about their grievances. "I have to say I agree with you," the host said, surprising Leslie into listening more closely. "I mean, how much can the taxpayers be expected to pay for education? Why should you pay higher taxes so somebody else's kid can learn to read?"

"I'm not saying I mind paying the taxes," the caller said defensively. "It's not that at all. I just don't think it's worth what they're asking."

"I know what you mean," Nick Nemoy said. "I've had it with all this rhetoric about the textbooks being outdated. Columbus still discovered America in 1492, the Civil War still ended in 1865. And what's been happening in Lebanon and on the moon

this century has been overrated, anyway. Right, fella?"

"Not exactly. I think probably we could do better with the textbooks—"

"But then you'd have to have teachers with something between their ears to teach from the new textbooks. Let's face it. All we're really talking about is glorified baby-sitters with three-month vacations. Everyone knows the real source of education these days is television." *Click.* "This is Nick Nemoy. Go ahead."

"I'm a teacher!" someone said hotly. "And I resent that last comment. You try taking a six-year-old child and letting television teach him to read!"

Leslie drove and listened incredulously as she heard the way Scott inspired dialogue between the callers, how he inserted figures and statistics in a negative way, as if arguing against the teachers, when she realized his absurd stand would sway listeners in the teachers' favor.

She realized how carefully he had researched the teachers' predicament and the financial situation of the state. He knew which politicians were on the side of the teachers and which were not. And because she had listened to his show, she knew now, too.

It was nine forty-five when she decided to go to the station and wait for him. The station lobby was empty, as it had been the first night she'd marched in there ready to take on the man who had split up her parents' marriage. She laughed under her breath at the memory, realizing how effective his methods had been for her parents.

She wanted to rush down the hall and into his studio and throw her arms around him. But she feared that such an act would throw him off-balance and he'd lose his momentum. Her eyes caught sight of the phone on the empty reception desk, and she smiled mischievously.

His number was written beside one of the buttons on the phone, so she picked up the receiver and dialed it. Her heart thumped loudly as the phone rang.

Her heart leapt when she heard "This is Nick Nemoy, go ahead."

"Nick Nemoy," Leslie said into the phone, using her most seductive voice, "I have a serious problem, and I need advice."

"And what might that problem be?" he asked quickly, as if his finger were on the button, ready to cut her off.

"I've been living in an ivory tower. I'm ready to escape, but I can't do it alone."

A few seconds of silence followed, and Leslie tried to picture him as he realized whom he was speaking to. "It's easy," he said a little more slowly than usual. "Ivory towers are full of windows. All you have to do is jump."

"What if there's no one there to catch me?" she asked softly.

"You know someone will be there," he answered, slipping out of his Nick Nemoy voice into the velvety cadence of Scott Jenkins. "A knight in tarnished armor can help a damsel in distress as well as the next guy. The trick is knowing she's in distress. Sometimes he doesn't know if she wants to be caught."

"How can I let him know?" she asked, tears of relief coming to her eyes.

A few more seconds passed, and Leslie smiled. Nick was speechless for the first time since she'd known him. "Maybe he's a bit of a schmuck," he said finally. "Maybe you'll have to marry him to convince him."

Leslie caught her breath. "Marry him?" She cleared her throat and laughing softly said, "I think I need that advice in person."

"Believe me, you'll get it," he rumbled for all to hear.

Biting her lip, she hung up, listening to the speaker on the wall as she heard Scott clear his throat, falter, then pick up. "Rack your brains to figure that one out," he told his audience with a laugh. "I have to go now. My steed grows restless. This is Nick Nemoy, signing off."

Leslie took a deep breath as Scott's theme music took over. Standing up and crossing to the doorway he'd soon be coming through, she leaned against the wall so that he wouldn't see her until he was in the room with her.

Her heart stopped as she heard his footsteps coming hurriedly along the hall, but it leapt to life when he came through the doorway, flying past her.

"Scott."

He swung around and caught his breath at the sight of her. His eyes drank her in. "You called me from here?"

Nodding her head, she rushed into his arms, warm and strong and everything she had hoped they'd be. "I thought I'd lost you," she whispered

tearfully. "I thought you had given up on us after you saw Stephen..."

At the mention of his name, Scott's hands closed gently around her face and he eased her away from him. "Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"Yes, I'm fine. It's just my lip," she answered, bewildered.

Hugging her tightly against him again, he buried his face in her hair. "God, I'm such a jerk. How could I have left you there with him? I thought you had gone back to him. I didn't know he was forcing you..."

"It's all right," she said in a soothing voice. "It's all over now. I don't think he'll be back."

Scott looked at her, his dark eyes blazing. "You better know he won't be back. I went after him when your mother told me what he did to you." Scott grinned at the memory, and he leaned back on the empty desk. "I breathed a little fire in his face. He won't bother you again."

Touching his face with fingers that trembled from a love so great that her body had not got used to dealing with it yet, she brought her sparkling green eyes to his. "I love you, Scott."

"I love you, too," he whispered, kissing her gently to keep from hurting her lip. "You remember when I said I had to be somewhere today when you came over?" he asked, pulling back from her and reaching in his shirt

pocket. "I had to go get this." He pulled out a tiny box and closed his hand over it. "I'd made the appointment before our fight Monday night, and I couldn't make myself cancel it. When you came over today, I decided to keep it." He opened the brown velvet box, revealing an enormous glowing emerald on a gold band.

"Like your eyes," he whispered. "I would have got you a diamond, but you know how I hate to be like everybody else."

Leslie's eyes welled with fresh tears at the beauty of the stone and the love that had gone behind it. She groped for words, but found none.

"Just say yes," he whispered, taking the ring out and putting in on her left hand. "Just say you'll marry me."

"Of course I'll marry you," she answered in a hoarse voice, between breaths. "After all, I'm getting such a great guy."

Scott pulled her out of the station into the night air, an enormous grin lighting his face. "Finally, she believes me," he said, looking heavenward.

In the distance, a lightning bolt flashed, and Scott pulled her into his arms. "Looks like there's going to be another storm tonight," he whispered, just before his lips closed over hers, "but this one's going to last a long, long time."



STAR SIGNS—SEPTEMBER & OCTOBER



CAPRICORN December 23-January 22

You could feel as though you are on an emotional seesaw this month with the high points followed quickly by the low moments. Some good will come out of it, and you should begin to realize just what it is you are asking of those close, and which relationships really matter most to you. Midmonth you could be celebrating a piece of good fortune.



AQUARIUS January 23-February 22

Time to reflect on what you have achieved so far this year, and on the direction your life is taking. A relationship that has been dragging rekindles and becomes to mean more than you hoped. This could be the start of something permanent. Finances look good, and you may splash out on some new clothes or even a complete change of image.



PISCES February 23-March 22

You are full of bright ideas with plenty of energy to match. Others are impressed by your achievements and offer welcome support, which makes this a happy and harmonious time. Be careful when making large purchases, as you are in danger of overspending.



ARIES March 23-April 22

The accent is on the family, and no one more than you understands the need for close relationships. Your efforts this month will be rewarded by the closeness you achieve. Career moves or changes look certain to occur around the end of the month, and you would do well to listen to advice on offer.



TAURUS April 23-May 22

There may be some difficult decisions to be made early in the month. Remember that nothing can be achieved by taking risks, and you must act in your own best interests. As the month progresses, a more stable but interesting pattern will emerge, which allows you the freedom to relax a bit.



GEMINI May 23-June 21

You are in demand both socially and professionally and that means an exciting and busy month in which some of your long-held ambitions are becoming reality. Don't neglect your health, and take some time out to pamper yourself.

STAR SIGNS (continued)



CANCER June 22-July 22

Although you are tempted to go it alone, others must be part of your decision making, especially having to do with career moves that could be happening around midmonth. Financial improvements will make for a happier end to the month, with many of you planning a late break or holiday.



LEO July 23-August 22

The pendulum has definitely swung your way, and this should be a happy and exciting month with many of your plans coming together. At last you should be able to see your way forward in a more stable and fulfilling manner. Someone close is enjoying your success and there could be some very special moments.



VIRGO August 23-September 22

Opportunities are cropping up for those community-minded Virgos. You will feel much in demand, and although you do very well and enjoy helping others, you must find time for yourself and those close, if friction is not to occur. Investments should pay off with a cash bonus toward the end of the month.



LIBRA September 23-October 22

Welcome the surge of energy you should be feeling this month and use it to pursue your hobbies or projects that have been put on hold for too long now. Midmonth you could feel impatient with someone close; however, if you face issues you could end up having to back down. Better to defuse any conflict before it starts.



SCORPIO October 23-November 22

An excellent month with plenty of scope and opportunity awaiting you. However, you will have to be selective about the route you choose, as you could take on too much and end up achieving little and tire yourself out in the process. If a friend seeks your assistance with a problem be careful your advice doesn't backfire on you.



SAGITTARIUS November 23-December 22

There could be legal or banking matters that need to be sorted out. Do not be tempted to try to do this by yourself, as the right professional help will be far more valuable and you should be able to turn the situation around to some degree of satisfaction. A party or family reunion lifts your spirits toward the end of this month.

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CROSSWORD #26

ACROSS

1. Caution
5. Circle segment
8. Shopping basket
12. Chills and fever
13. Needlefish
14. African lily
15. Meet at a point
17. Charge per unit
18. Smaller
20. Pierce
24. Lovers' meetings
28. Small arrows
29. Meadow
30. Still, in poetry
31. Great Lake
32. Sleeping place
33. Wings
34. Lifetime
35. Ancient
36. Rub out
37. Calm
39. Newsman Dan
40. Becomes taut
42. Reckless
45. Protected
50. Not at home
51. Bard's before
52. Greek letter
53. Scream
54. Women's org.
55. Sports group

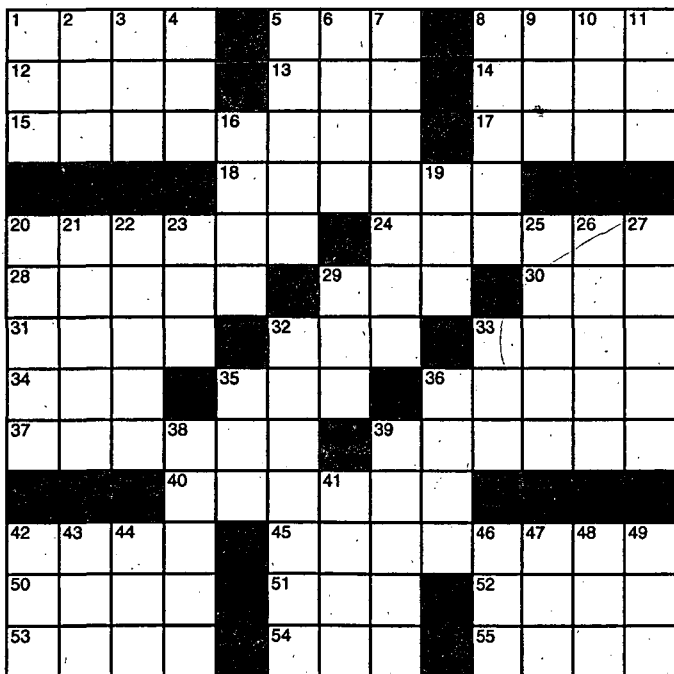
DOWN

1. Female soldier
2. In the past
3. Jog
4. Sagebrush State: abbr.
5. Concur
6. Tatters
7. Having a tuft
8. Cash-and-_____
9. Pie _____ mode
10. Decay
11. Golf mound
16. Building additions
19. Epoch
20. Thoughts

21. "The Simpsons" mother
22. Snooper
23. Consumed
25. Word in psalms
26. Make fun of
27. Show scorn
29. Guided
32. Mixed
33. Actor Carney
35. Single thing
36. Comfort
38. Gasoline additive
39. Allude (to)
41. Antitoxins

42. Sunbeam
43. Reverent dread
44. "My gal _____"
46. Insect egg
47. Female deer
48. Greek letter
49. Canine mother

Solution on page 75 of this issue.



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Christmas ever!*



About your prizes...

- (1) **A Ford Mustang!** An American classic for more than 25 years!
- (2) **Two diamond earrings!** One-half carat each, set in white gold.
- (3) **Three fancy dinners!**
- (4) **Four-piece Hartmann* luggage set!**
- (5) **Five golden rings!** Earrings, 2 bangle bracelets and ring!
- (6) **Six-piece Calphalon* cookware set!**
- (7) **Seven-piece RCA* home entertainment system!** Includes 27" TV, VCR, AM/FM receiver, CD player, cassette deck and more!
- (8) **Eight Waterford goblets!**
- (9) **Nine ladies dancing, and...**
- (10) **Ten lords a leaping!** You'll see the New York City Ballet* during your long weekend (4 days/3 nights) in New York!
- (11) **Eleven pipers piping!** Be our guest at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland!
- (12) **Twelve-day Hawaiian Holiday!**

Return your entry today!

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